The New Criterion

December 1995

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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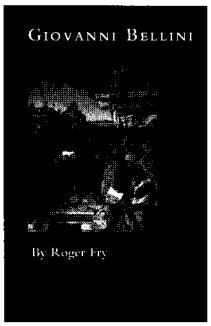

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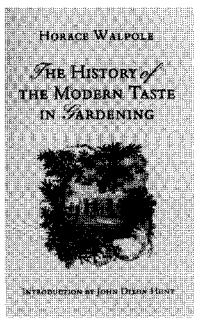

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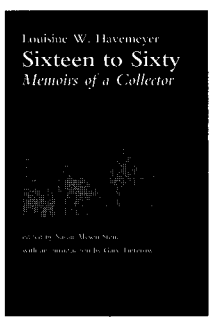

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The New Criterion *December 1995*

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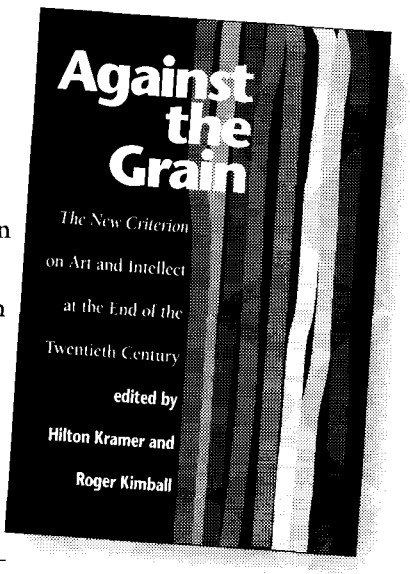
A cornucopia of brilliant criticism from the pages of *The New Criterion*

Against the Grain

The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century

edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball



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Notes & Comments: December 1995

Onanastics, anyone?

Satire and parody are among the conspicuous casualties of contemporary cultural radicalism and its grim-faced P.C. brigades. Yet it was not so long ago that these refreshing rhetorical arts still thrived. One thinks, for example, of David Lodge's *Small World* (1984), a delicious send-up of the trendy Lit-Crit establishment that supplanted traditional literary studies with an unlovely smorgasbord of deconstruction, neo-Marxism, cultural studies, radical feminism, and kindred other disasters.

One of the chief values of good parody or satire is to be a goad to conscience. By holding the ridiculous up to ridicule, these verbal *esprits* can help to recall us to sanity. In this sense, parody, like satire, is an incentive to reflection and reform. That is why its disappearance or attenuation is a moral as well as an aesthetic loss.

The problem is that if parody or satire is to be effective, there must be a discernible distance between the reality and the parodic imitation. If it is to do us any good, we must be able to recognize a parody *as* a parody: as an exaggerated, absurd, or otherwise hypertrophied metamorphosis of some problematic social reality, not just another run-of-the-mill, business-as-usual *instance* of it. Had people made a habit of eating babies, Swift's "Modest Proposal" would have lost much of its bite, so to speak.

And there, alas, is the rub. As we have had occasion to observe in these pages before, the reality of elite academic and cultural life in our society more and more beggars any form of caricature. When the dictates of political correctness reign supreme, as they do today, absurdity threatens to become the norm. Aspiring parodists and satirists are left struggling to stay a half step ahead of the latest folly.

That is one reason we welcomed the appearance of the "LU/English Newsletter," a hilarious spoof of English-department life that materialized in our mailbox recently. Apparently emanating from Rutgers University, the anonymous eight-page newsletter mercilessly satirizes developments at "Lagado University." Readers of *Gulliver's Travels* will remember that Lagado is the mad kingdom that Lemuel Gulliver visited where frenzied, half-educated professors, having sojourned to a floating island, "came back with a very little smattering in mathematics, but full of volatile spirits acquired in that airy region." They "dislike the management of every thing below" in their country, so they set about to "contrive new rules and methods" for all of life, attempting, for example, to extract "sun-beams out of cucum-

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bers." Inevitable failure only leads them to redouble their efforts. On the evidence of this newsletter, anyway, the English department at Lagado University resembles its counterpart at any number of real-life colleges and universities across the country.

Some of the "news" retailed in this document requires a familiarity with intimacies of the academic scene to be fully appreciated. For example, it helps to know something about the cynical sophistries purveyed by the Duke English professor Stanley Fish —a man whose dazzling and highly remunerative career has sparked as much comment as his studied inconsistencies—in order to savor the item about a lecture by the "academic superstar" named "Stanley Eugene Poseur." (We especially liked the conclusion: the lecture over, "Prof. Stanley Eugene Poseur collected a handsome fee at the cashier's office, leapt gracefully into his fire-engine red Aston-Martin and, with a jaunty wave, whizzed off in the direction of the University of Minnesota.")

But most items featured in the "LU/English Newsletter" are perfectly intelligible without specialized knowledge. There are little things, such as the note promising $25 "for news about any alumnus/a with a full-time job in an academically related field," or—under the category of "Alumni News"—the information that "Jason Jabolinski, Ph.D. 1987, was interviewed for a job." We learn, too, that the "Remedial English En/Visioning Committee" recommended by a vote of forty-nine to one to rename "Remedial Preremediation English" ("ENG 0.00001") as "Antepreliminary Compensatory Nonstandard English" because "the faculty feel that the previous name has proven damaging to the students' self-esteem," etc. There are also tidbits about sensitivity training, the effects of "secondary carnophagia" (meat eating), and marches "to protest whatever is being currently protested or, when necessary, to protest the lack of protest."

Perhaps our favorite item, however, came at the end, under the rubrics of "Departmental News" and "Affirmative Action." Here we read that

> the English Department has succeeded in hiring Adamada McGonigle-Gonzalez as full professor in the face of fierce competitive bidding from Berkeley and Stanford. McGonigle-Gonzalez is an epileptic deaf-mute trisexual hermaphrodite dwarf whose one hundred fifty traceable maternal and paternal foremammals over seven generations have been computed to make hir [*sic*] 13.5 percent African, . . . 6.25 percent Pequot, . . . 9.5 percent Latino, . . . 4 percent Asian, .002 percent Samoan, and .001 percent Aleut.
>
> Under a complex agreement negotiated by a committee of senior administrators chaired by Dean Janus Farandole of the Office of Multicultural Goals-Not-Quotas, Professor McGonigle-Gonzalez will be given the use of President Bleatly's office, residence, dog, and daughter, a five percent commission on all federal grants received over the next ten years, a pre-emptive customized apology from President Francis Leo Lawrence of Rutgers University, concurrent full professorships in the Theology, Sociology, and Philosophy Departments and full tuition to complete hir undergraduate and graduate education.

Anyone familiar with the effects of political correctness and so-called "affirmative action" on the hiring practices of our institutions of higher education knows that this little tableau is right on the money. It exaggerates, but only slightly: there really is fierce competition among universities to find teachers of the "correct" ethnic, sexual, and behavioral complexion; candidates who pass *these* tests are given *carte blanche* when it comes to jobs and preferments.

And there is more. The front page of the newsletter celebrates "Onanastics: The Review of One-Handed Literature," "a quarterly devoted to explorations of pornology

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in all its ranges, planes, and facets." This, of course, is meant to spoof the academy's obsession with outré sexuality. We learn about "scholarly" articles that ponder "homoerotic interrogations of the lower digestive tract in recent autoerogenous literature," "the homo- and heteroerogenous potentialities of so-called scratch-and-sniff technology," and so on; a "Faculty News" column introduces us to such new books as *Below the Belly of the Beast: Phallomorphisms in Wholesale Plumbing Fixtures Catalogues* and *The Sty that Binds: Analyzing Transpecies Bondage in Augustus Whiffle's "On the Care of the Pig."*

On first acquaintance, then, the "LU/ English Newsletter" seemed like delightful parody. But it did not take long for reality to catch up. A few days after receiving the newsletter we opened the mail to find a new book from the trendiest of trendy publishers, Routledge, called *Solitary Pleasures: The Historical, Literary, and Artistic Discourses of Autoeroticism,* edited by Paula Bennett and Vernon A. Rosario II. In it one will find articles on "The Politics of Solitary Pleasures," "Playing With Herself: Feminine Sexuality and Aesthetic Indifference," and "Coming in Handy: The J/O Spectacle and the Gay Male Subject in Almodóvar." Also reprinted is the notorious essay "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl"—an MLA classic—as well as an essay on the important question "Can Robinson Crusoe Find True Happiness (Alone)? Beyond the Genitals and History on the Island of Hope." According to the editors, one of the main points of the volume is to demonstrate "the myriad ways in which masturbation has . . . served as a locus for creative effort as well as for political resistance. . . . [a]nd therefore [is] basic to much that is good and enriching in human life." So now you know.

In manner, these essays epitomize the grotesque parody of scholarship that disfigures so much "cutting-edge" academic writing in the humanities today. It contains equal portions of outlandish sex, hermetic "theory," and left-wing proselytizing. In substance, the essays are so many advocacy pieces for normalizing depravity and rendering sex the predominant, and practically the exclusive, interest of literary studies. When even *Sense and Sensibility* is transformed into an allegory of perversion, something very basic has gone awry.

From one point of view, of course, books like *Solitary Pleasures* are simply instances of academic buffoonery: intellectually quite worthless, to be sure, but as amusingly outrageous and absurd as an imaginary book about bondage in Augustus Whiffle's *On the Care of the Pig*. (Would that P. G. Wodehouse were here for that!)

In other respects, however, such books are alternately pathetic and profoundly disturbing. They are pathetic when we consider the extent to which their authors seem trapped in the intellectual and moral wasteland they celebrate. There is at any rate a sense in which these people are more to be pitied than scolded. But books like *Solitary Pleasures* are disturbing indeed when we remember that their authors are among the men and women whom society has entrusted to preserve the riches of our civilization and to impart those riches to today's college students. Are these really the kind of people we should be employing as teachers of the young? It is a sad and ultimately an intolerable situation, and not least because it has made the practice of effective satire or parody all but impossible.

Virtual art

It is always bad news when our art museums find new ways to subvert the purposes for which they were created. Nowadays the ways are so many and so varied, ranging from the crassest commercialization

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to the most flagrant politicization. Soon we shall need special guides designed to advise museumgoers on what to *avoid* at these institutions if their primary goal is to look at actual works of art—the "originals," as we now call the objects that artists have made in order to distinguish them from the plethora of counterfeits that museums currently expend so much energy in promoting. Picasso on a coffee mug, Rembrandt on a T-shirt, Monet on bed sheets, and Matisse by the yard: it's a wonder that we haven't yet seen Van Gogh's ear reproduced in the form of a garnet brooch. And all this is in the name of advancing an appreciation of fine art.

Now, owing to advances in computer technology that have nothing to contribute to our experience of the art of the past, a new development in aesthetic subversion is being visited upon the museum public. This is the computerized information center, which is alleged to give museumgoers new ways to "explore" works of art without actually looking at the objects themselves. In what is called the Micro Gallery at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, for example, we are told that "visitors can learn about the life and work of more than 650 artists. Illustrations of the artist's work on view at the National Gallery appear with each biography, along with pronunciation of the artist's name." Also available at the touch of a finger are a subject index, a "Timeline" index that "provides context"—non-art historical events—and some allegedly "in-depth" information features on composition, symbolism, and "context" again, this time through diagrams and animation.

There are also lessons in geography, showing on maps where artists lived, and a special "zoom feature" that enables visitors to conduct what is called a "close visual examination of every work in the Micro Gallery"—all without going to the bother of looking at the originals.

On a recent visit to the Micro Gallery, we conducted an informal survey—purely anecdotal, as the polltakers say—to determine how many of its patrons had seen or were planning to see the objects they were having so much fun with on the computer screen. Among the first four couples we questioned, none had yet ventured into the galleries containing the paintings—mostly the works of the Old Masters—they were "interacting with" on line. A fifth couple said flat out that they thought there was much more to be learned about painting from the computer program than from looking at the pictures themselves "without help." We concluded our mini survey by visiting the galleries containing the paintings that seemed to be the favorites of the Micro-users, and found—not to our surprise—that the Micro Gallery was already a bigger draw at the National Gallery than the permanent galleries containing real art.

In the Micro Gallery, visitors are told that "touch-screen monitors offer color images, text, animation, and sound that together provide ways of understanding the works of art on display in the galleries." But the reality seems to be that the experience of art is once again subverted by the promotion of its technological counterfeits. Computers have already given us virtual reality; we are now in for the rise of virtual art.

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The achievement of Ralph Ellison

by James W. Tuttleton

For by a trick of fate (our racial problems notwithstanding) the human imagination is integrative—and the same is true of the centrifugal force that inspirits the democratic process. And while fiction is but a form of symbolic action, a mere game of "as if," therein lies its true function and its potential for effecting change. For at its most serious, just as is true of politics at its best, it is a thrust toward a human ideal. And it approaches that ideal by a subtle process of negating the world of things as given in favor of a complex of man-made positives.

—Ralph Ellison, "*Introduction to* Invisible Man"

Although Ralph Ellison (1914–1994) died last year and is now personally lost to us, he has perhaps never been more visible to those with an eye for distinguished American fiction and criticism. And certainly his work has never been more necessary to American literary culture than it is today. The salient sign of his visibility is of course his one—and only—novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), a work that won him the National Book Award. It is in my view the best novel ever written by an African-American, and it may well be the best novel written since World War II. Certainly millions of copies of it have been sold and read; and it has become an inevitable assignment in school and college courses in the American novel, thanks to its splendid narrative account of the apprenticeship of a young black boy struggling to be seen, struggling to define himself against the forces of poverty, educational incompetence, white racism, political manipulation by Communists and black nationalists, and even personal exploitation by sex-crazed white women.

I do not mean to suggest that *these subjects* lifted *Invisible Man* to international importance. But Ellison's mastery in the handling of scene and dialogue, his vivid characterization and plotting, and his dazzling repertory of styles and symbolic devices—all of these elements of his tragicomic poetry made for stunning intellectual richness and an aesthetic delight greatly superior to anything produced by the "Harlem Renaissance" novelists (Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, et al.) or even by the prolix Richard Wright or William Attaway during the 1930s and 1940s.

Although he wrote only one novel, I think it fair to say that Ellison also towered over his near contemporaries James Baldwin, LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka), William Melvin Kelley, and John A. Williams. Indeed, compared to Ellison's great achievement, the more recent contemporary adulation of Jamaica Kincaid, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison seems grotesque. If these comparisons segregate Ellison from white fiction and seem to diminish him as merely "a credit to his race," let me go further and say that, in my view, *Invisible Man* towered over anything produced by Mailer, Bellow, Malamud, Roth, Updike, Cheever, Barth, Vonnegut, Pynchon, Hawkes, and Barthelme.

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I shall have more to say about *Invisible Man* in due course. But another sign of Ellison's intellectual presence—and pertinence for literary culture now at the end of our century—is the new Modern Library edition of his nonfiction prose. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*[1] includes all of Ellison's published and unpublished expository writing. Readers familiar with his already available volumes *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986) will find these books completely reprinted here. In addition, more than a score of other, previously uncollected writings have been brought together to complete this huge volume. In all there are some sixty-one essays expressive of Ellison's thinking about a wide range of cultural subjects. Aside from autobiographical reminiscences and interviews with journalists and editors, there are a great many celebrations of American music.

In his youth Ellison had a deep desire to play the trumpet and majored in music at Tuskegee Institute; but though he never made it as a musician, his love of spirituals, the blues, jazz, and classical music shines on nearly every page. We also have here recollections of (or reflections on) memorable performers like Mahalia Jackson, Charlie Parker, Jimmy Rushing, Simon Estes, and Jessye Norman. There are likewise observations on the visual arts (especially the work of Romare Bearden); appreciations of other writers (Mark Twain, Richard Wright, Stephen Crane, Alain Locke, Bernard Malamud); several lectures and addresses at colleges and universities; the original working notes for—and a thirtieth-year introduction to—*Invisible Man*; a great many reflections on race in America; and extensive commentary on the indivisibility of American culture as a fusion (to be celebrated) of distinctive ethnic, racial, and cultural elements.

There is so much richness here that it is impossible to summarize the book. A simple way to view it would be to say that it is the work of a midcentury American artist and intellectual reflecting seriously on elements of both high and low culture in the public life. Nowadays the term "intellectual" stands in derision, as it is associated with power- and publicity-hungry freaks in the academy. But Ellison came to his majority as a writer just after World War II, when the term had some dignity as a vocation and it was still possible to aspire to be one. His conception of the life of the mind and art was shaped by T. S. Eliot, Henry James, André Malraux, Kenneth Burke, W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and the writers then associated with *Partisan Review*. He did not always agree with them about politics, race, and culture, but he conducted his arguments with great seriousness, personal dignity, and an actual knowledge of racial and cultural experience in the America to the west of the Hudson River.

Perhaps some sense of this remarkable writer's mind can be suggested by attention to several themes that run through this definitive collection. First, a great many essays deal with how American culture has been and is being formed and shaped as a dynamic process that fuses into one entity a wide range of human activities. Ellison was always preoccupied in some part of his mind with the way elements of any race's cultural expression filter into the mainstream of (and thus help to form) American culture. Ellison thought black American culture immensely rich, as indeed it is. But in the 1930s black culture had been grossly oversimplified by white American leftists and others who reduced blacks to the stereotype of the wretched of the earth. Segregated and excluded from the inner circle of American life, blacks were supposedly so desperate for a better life that they could and should be manipulated to bring about the socialist revolution. In this struggle, black artists were supposedly useful agents. Ellison saw how the Communists had seduced and abandoned black

1 *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, edited, with an introduction, by John F. Callahan. Preface by Saul Bellow. The Modern Library, 856 pages, $20.

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writers like Richard Wright, and he had no intention of being co-opted by the Left. Later, in the Sixties civil-rights movement, in order to further the cause of desegregation, political liberals (both black and white) once again reduced blacks to this stereotype of the racial victim who has been excluded from American culture.

Ellison was drawn to the radical Left in the Thirties and Forties (he even wrote for *The New Masses*) and was supportive of integration and black civil rights in the Fifties and Sixties. But he would not let this reductionist stereotype of black culture go uncriticized. Black life was too positive and various in its engaging forms. As he remarked in "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview": "I have no desire to write propaganda. Instead I felt it important [in *Invisible Man*] to explore the full range of American Negro humanity and to affirm those qualities which are of value beyond any question of segregation, economics or previous condition of servitude. The obligation was always there and there is much to affirm."

As these essays make plain, whatever the legal condition of slavery and desegregation may have meant, in the domain of culture and society blacks had always been fully involved in the national life. Many blacks had long been reduced to menial work as cooks, domestics, share-croppers, yardboys, and manual laborers. But over the years there emerged a great many important black ministers, teachers, lawyers, musicians, editors, businessmen, union leaders, and college presidents—all of them defining and expressing a rich and diverse and creative black culture. In their preoccupation with black victims, few liberal whites seemed to notice these blacks or to speak about their contributions to American life. Indeed, this complex black culture was so diverse that not even any single *black* could speak for it.

Not only was North American black culture immensely diverse, it was also so rich and influential that, in Ellison's view, many of its forms had already entered the mainstream culture of America and had been assimilated into the consciousness of whites long before many whites were even aware of it. Much of Ellison's essay-writing was devoted to showing this contribution blacks had made to the national experience in its broadest terms, that is, in both high culture and the popular culture. But his point was never merely a pride in individual black achievement. What interested Ellison most was how a national culture gets formed in the first place. In these essays he shows that the forms of folk culture (white as well as black) are invariably already integrated in America. Spirituals, the blues, and jazz were originally distinctive forms of more or less anonymous black folk consciousness. But such was their moral and aesthetic power, despite the fact that no one person had "originated" them, that they permanently changed mainstream popular music. But it hardly ends there.

Folk culture, which is this already intermixed and continually integrating amalgam of creative elements, was itself for Ellison the fertile seedground of superior artistic genius. Spirituals, the blues, and jazz, for instance, did not merely influence mainstream popular music but also re-emerged in transfigured form in the musical expression of brilliant individual composers like George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, and Igor Stravinsky, to name just a few.

Ellison, for many years the Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at New York University, was a colleague and friend of mine. And when he learned that I knew John Lewis, the founder and director of the Modern Jazz Quartet, he was keen to meet him. Lewis had also been trained in the conservatory tradition of classical music. Bach, Mozart, and Stravinsky were as familiar to Lewis as Duke Ellington, Satchmo, and "Bird" Parker. And Lewis's jazz compositions—and not merely those in the "Third Stream" phase—were brilliant realizations of Ralph Ellison's tenaciously held belief that the lines of creative influence flow from black culture into white and back

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again, and from low culture into high and back again, all this producing a single, unified, dynamic national culture. In fact, for Ellison, American culture was a rich seamless tapestry of varicolored elements in which there were so many black contributions that, after a while, it was sometimes impossible to identify them as such.

A second theme running through these essays is the role of the writer in America. Ellison certainly saw himself as a figure in the continuum of black writing. But, more broadly, he knew himself to participate in a wider current of mainstream American fiction. Beyond that, he saw himself as a citizen of the republic of letters that included the Frenchman Malraux, the Pole Joseph Conrad, the Russian Dostoevsky. Since "white literature" was continually influenced by black writing, and vice versa, he did not believe in the segregation of black literature in college courses like "The Negro Novel," etc. During his Schweitzer Professorship, I chaired the English department, worked out with him an annual program of lectures, and used to talk to him at great length about the American masters who were our common pedagogical concern. As a teacher, his was truly a "rainbow curriculum" of various writers exploring the multicultural aspects of American life in a democratic polity. But his choice of books and writers was always based upon considerations of art rather than race.

During the Sixties, when the black-power movement got going in earnest, Ellison's lectures and essays on the unity of an American culture to which blacks had made an inseparable contribution brought him under shrill and sometimes raucous censure from radical separatist blacks who thought him too subservient to racist honky culture, which they wanted to demolish. Some black radicals could never forgive him for his portrait of Ras the Exhorter, the black nationalist rioter in *Invisible Man*, who romantically solicited and indeed incurred his own destruction. The abuse Ellison suffered in those years of the New Left, as a so-called "Uncle Tom," was wholly undeserved, as *Invisible Man* and his nonfiction works are one long brilliant protest against the continuing forms of American racism. But the courage and dignity with which he bore insult from even his own people—evident in the interview "Indivisible Man"—were signs of great personal magnanimity.

As a black novelist and intellectual, Ellison saw his role as the affirmation and celebration of American life as a whole. This also put him at odds with white radicals, who wanted him to sign off and merely denounce America for her history of slavery and continuing racism. Socialists like Irving Howe and some of the others in the *Partisan Review* crowd wanted Ellison to reproduce Richard Wright's savage denunciations of white racism in *Native Son* (1940), *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), and *Black Boy* (1945). In "Black Boys and Native Sons" (1963), Howe excoriated "accommodationists" like Ellison:

> In response to Baldwin and Ellison, Wright would have said (I virtually quote the words he used in talking to me during the summer of 1958) that only through struggle could men with black skins, and for that matter, all the oppressed of the world, achieve their humanity. It was a lesson, said Wright, with a touch of bitterness yet not without kindness, that the younger writers would have to learn in their own way and their own time. All that has happened since bears him out.

But did it? I don't think so, nor did Ellison, who had been befriended by Wright. In *Invisible Man* Ellison, like Wright, in *Native Son,* dealt frankly, comically, and horrifyingly with the forms of white racism. But at the same time he knew that Wright's posture of despair, alienation, and feverish militancy was not the only stance for the black writer. Hence he refused to reduce his unnamed protagonist to the subhuman condition of Wright's Bigger Thomas, and he deplored Wright's dismissal of what Wright had called "all that art for art's sake

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crap." For Ellison, fiction was not racial propaganda. As he remarked in "The World and the Jug," "what an easy con-game for ambitious, publicity-hungry Negroes this stance of 'militancy' has become." And he liked to quote—of all people—President Lyndon B. Johnson's remark that art is not a social weapon. For Ellison, the demand—whether made by white or black critics—that the Negro writer subordinate his art to anti-racist propaganda denies the writer his own vision:

> For I found the greatest difficulty for a Negro writer was the problem of revealing what he truly felt, rather than serving up what Negroes were supposed to feel, and were encouraged to feel. And linked to this was the difficulty, based upon our long habit of deception and evasion, of depicting what really happened within our areas of American life, and putting down with honesty and without bowing to ideological expediencies the attitudes and values which gave Negro American life its sense of wholeness, and which render it bearable and human and, when measured by our own terms, desirable.

He said that for this reason black writers often failed "to achieve a vision of life and a resourcefulness of craft commensurate with the complexity of their actual situation. Too often they fear to leave the uneasy sanctuary of race to take their chances in the world of art." It was in the world of art and according to aesthetic standards that Ralph Ellison wanted *Invisible Man* judged. And his artistic standards were so high and exacting that he was never able to complete a second novel (especially after a fire in his summer house destroyed his working manuscript).

A third theme that runs through this volume is the praise of the American language as a vernacular medium adequate to the highest art. Few American writers, white or black, have been as sensitive as he to the evolution of the American language out of the whirling maelstrom of immigrant experience. He immensely admired Twain's ear for Southern speech, studied the Mississippi dialect in Faulkner's prose, and listened for and learned from James's vernacular locutions. Ellison was naturally sensitive to the speech of blacks as a distinctive idiom of our "American version of English." In a speech to Haverford students in 1969, he noted how "the American language owes something of its directness, flexibility, music, imagery, mythology, and folklore to the Negro presence." In "Going to the Territory," he called the slaves and their successors ingenious in developing the linguistic skills necessary to communicate in a mixed society, and he particularly praised blacks for their "melting and blending of vernacular and standard speech and a grasp of the occasions in which each, or both, were called for." In fact, Ellison called the vernacular style "the American style":

> But by "vernacular" I mean far more than popular or indigenous language. I see the vernacular as a dynamic *process* in which the most refined styles from the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-by-ear improvisations which we invent in our efforts to control our environment and entertain ourselves. This is not only in language and literature, but in architecture and cuisine, in music, costume, dance, tools, and technology. In it the styles and techniques of the past are adjusted to the needs of the present, and in its integrative action the high styles of the past are democratized. From this perspective the vernacular is, no less than the styles associated with aristocracy, a gesture toward perfection.

Richard Kostelanetz once called Ellison a "brown-skinned aristocrat." This sounds like "reverse color prejudice" to me, as well as class prejudice; and it implies that he was too "white" to be a black. Many blacks do have white ancestry, through no responsibility of their own. Ellison even had Cherokee ancestry; and when he learned that I too was from the South and had a Cherokee grandmother, it sealed our friendship. In his own selfhood he was the living person-

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ification of the interrelation of racial and cultural elements in America that was his dominating theme. And he saw me in that light as well.

Was he an aristocrat? Indeed, he did carry himself as if he were A Visible Somebody. He was an aristocrat, but only in the way that every American man and woman is an heir to incalculable cultural wealth. Ellison's whole career, insofar as I understand it, was devoted to making clear that elements of the high style—like elements of popular culture—are available to *everyone for everyday life.* He had started out as a poor boy in Oklahoma, looking at magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper's*, recognizing in them a style higher and better and more distinguished than what he saw around him. It was like the difference between his daily clothes and his Sunday go-to-meeting clothes. The boy decided that he wanted to wear glad rags every day of the week, and so he became one of the most elegantly dressed men I have ever known.

Further, as a youth he found in Conrad, Hemingway, and Eliot a literary imagination superior to that of the best sellers and poetasters, and he wanted what these artists had to give. Mozart and Rossini were his inheritance—as available to him (or to any black boy) as to Marian Anderson. High culture, the fusion of black and white influences and much else besides, was his for the taking. He was as comfortable—clad in a tuxedo, listening to chamber music in the staid, large reading room of the Century Club, to which Henry James had also belonged—as he was in an all-black jazz nightclub toe-tapping to local riffs. Indeed, in every aspect of life Ellison worked to bring the high style, the patrician, the best, into our common everyday possession; and to lift vital, worthwhile folk creations into general consciousness as values in themselves and as a common American legacy offering inspiration to rising genius. This was, for Ralph Ellison, what a democratic culture was all about.

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Cézanne at the Grand Palais

by Karen Wilkin

A handful of individuals have changed the way we perceive the world around us, even the way we think about ourselves: in science, Galileo, Darwin, Einstein, and perhaps Freud; in art, Giotto and Cézanne. Five hundred years of Western painting, the illusionism that preoccupied artists from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, were signaled by Giotto's robustly modeled figures. Cézanne was the first to suggest how these entrenched values could be transformed. Yet the "prophet of modernism," as he has been called, never rejected tradition. "To my mind," Cézanne wrote in 1905, "one should not substitute oneself for the past, one has merely to add a new link." His work connects the past with what was to come, pointing to what would be the future of adventurous painting in Europe and America but at the same time profoundly informed by the Classicism of Nicolas Poussin, the Romanticism of Eugène Delacroix, the Realism of Gustave Courbet, and more. Two years before his death, at work on paintings that still look innovative and fiercely original, Cézanne wrote to a young artist friend that the greatest painters were "the Venetians and the Spaniards."

Much of the upheaval that we call modernism has its origins in Cézanne's art. Until recently, he was the artist any ambitious painter had to come to terms with, if he was to discover his own identity. To Matisse, he was "the father of us all," to Klee, "the teacher par excellence," and to Picasso, "a mother who protects her children." Whole movements, entire reconceptions of what painting can be, are rooted in Cézanne's hard-won innovations. Fauvism's startling translation of visible reality into structures of saturated color merely intensifies Cézanne's method of modeling with contrasting warm and cool hues. Cubism's radical reinvention of how painting could refer to space and form (the first real change since the fifteenth century, when Giotto's ideas were codified as mathematical linear perspective) stems directly from Cézanne's art. The unstable space of Cubism has its origins in his dissection of visible reality into discrete patches of color, set side by side, and in his reversal of traditional perspective in the way forms seem to bulk toward us. So does the all-over expansiveness of American postwar abstraction. The confrontational spread of Abstract Expressionism, Color Field abstraction, and Minimalism can be read as extreme manifestations of the insistent frontality and *presentness* of Cézanne's paintings, his affirmation of the expressive reality of both paint and flat canvas. It's even arguable that today's dominance of idea over form is not just a legacy of Duchamp's playful iconoclasm but also owes something to Cézanne's independence of mind, his refusal, despite his well-documented desire for recognition and honor, to make his work conform to the standards of his day—even to those of his fellow rebels.

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Without Cézanne, the history of art from the mid-nineteenth century on might have been quite different. We might even look at the art that precedes the mid-nineteenth century differently. Of course, he was the right man with the right combination of peculiar talents at the right time. Born in 1839 in Aix-en-Provence, he began to devote himself seriously to painting at a time when the traditional, hierarchical values of the Salon and the Academy were starting to erode. By the 1860s, when Cézanne finally convinced his father to let him abandon his law studies and go to Paris to study art, large-scale Realist landscapes, such as those by Corot and the Barbizon painters, were being taken as seriously as scenes from mythology, ancient history, or the Bible. While this disconcerted a public conditioned to believe that pictures of heroic figures in action were superior to any others, it suggested stimulating new possibilities to a generation of young painters, including Cézanne, interested in truthfully recording their observations. None of which makes his towering achievement less remarkable, his art less potent.

If there's anyone with a modicum of visual literacy who doubts any of this, I advise a trip to Paris before January 7, to see the splendid Cézanne retrospective organized jointly by the Musée d'Orsay, the Tate Gallery, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.[1] Conceived to commemorate the centennial of Cézanne's first one-man show, held in 1895 at the gallery of the legendary Ambroise Vollard (the painter was fifty-six and had eleven more years to live), the retrospective is a well-chosen assembly of deservedly celebrated canvases, punctuated with less familiar ones, from remote public collections or inaccessible private holdings. It's possible, as always, to lament omissions and wonder about inclusions, but all the painter's major themes are addressed, sometimes sketchily and sometimes with marvelous thoroughness. Drawings and superb watercolors, often closely related to the exhibited canvases, make Cézanne's process especially vivid, while a straightforward, largely chronological installation allows you to follow his evolution and to savor both individual works and obsessively repeated motifs. (Unfortunately, the drawings and watercolors are not integrated, but in a separate section.) Like the show itself, the catalogue is direct and clear, free of polemical, revisionist essays and modish extrapolations. Instead, there are informative entries that sum up past and present scholarship, an exhaustive chronology illustrated with wonderful photographs, information about Cézanne's collectors, and a fascinating collection of critical responses to Cézanne's exhibitions.

The show is lean, focused, and exciting. It demands effort, however, not simply because of the crowds and the Grand Palais's capricious lighting but because Cézanne *has* been such an overwhelming influence. It's difficult to look at his work without seeing the intervening layers imposed by his admirers and interpreters—to contemplate his bathers, for example, without thinking about Matisse's responses or Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. But the show underscores not only the powerful effect Cézanne had on subsequent artists but how much he owed to the past. (If you saw the recent Poussin and Titian exhibitions in Paris and London, or the Delacroix and Courbet shows in New York a few years ago, that's a bonus.) More important, what emerges is Cézanne's truculent originality, his stubborn, paradoxical individuality. That Cézanne's art demands that you acknowledge its debt to the past and its announcement of the future, at the same time that you are wholly engaged by its present, is part of what makes it so absorbing.

1 "Cézanne" opened at the Grand Palais, Paris, on September 30, 1995, and remains on view through January 7, 1996. The show will travel to the Tate Gallery, London (February 8–April 28, 1996), and the Philadelphia Museum of Art (May 30–August 18, 1996). The U.S. edition of the catalogue, with essays by Françoise Cachin, Joseph J. Rishel, and others, will be published in the spring by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams.

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From first to last—from the laborious paintings of the 1860s and early '70s, to the rhythmically stroked canvases of 1906, the year of his death—Cézanne's art embodies contradiction. It is dispassionate and full of feeling, disciplined and intense, detached and deeply engaged, profoundly inventive and no less profoundly rooted in actual experience. His pictures can seem at once rock-solid and about to dissolve into a series of individual touches, at once convincingly illusionistic and declaratively flat. Cézanne's celebrated method of rendering form with carefully adjusted patches of warm and cool color creates a convincing sense of mass, but simultaneously, his deliberate placement of those patches forcibly reminds you of the flatness of the canvas and the artifice of painting itself, generating almost irreconcilable tension.

It's even difficult to reconcile Cézanne's superheated youthful works with the cool, slowly wrought pictures of his maturity. His bacchanals, biblical scenes, and lurid allegories of the 1860s and early '70s, all well represented in Paris, often seem wholly incompatible with his later, matter-of-fact still lifes, landscapes, and portraits; in the early years, even such apparently neutral subjects share the feverish intensity of the violent erotic and religious motifs. At the Grand Palais, the young painter's struggle with his own strengths and weaknesses, his battle with recalcitrant materials was obvious; so was his admiration for Venetian color, for Delacroix's literary themes and dramatic chiaroscuro, and for Courbet's forthright presentation. Cézanne evidently responded to the energy, robustness, and *verismo* of Courbet's works, which offered a powerful example of a new, non-academic way of making art, just as their author's deliberate provocation of the establishment offered a powerful example of a new way of being a successful artist. But Cézanne also grasped the importance of Courbet's varied, seemingly inconsistent paint application, something that nineteenth-century (and some twentieth-century) eyes often found disturbing, and made paint handling itself crucial to the expressive force of his own pictures. Witness his gritty palette-knife pictures of the 1860s and '70s, with their slabs of thick, dragged paint, with which the retrospective begins. These rapidly executed portraits—many of his lawyer uncle, Dominique—solid still lifes, and unsettling narratives seem startlingly modern in their physical density and emotional nakedness. But at the same time that you admire the near-contemporary immediacy and force of feeling in the Musée d'Orsay's *Portrait of Achille Emperaire* (1869–70), a frail figure with long, sensitive hands and an oversized, beautiful head, you are reminded of Velázquez's searching portraits of the dwarves at the Spanish court; Cézanne's picture has less refinement and ease than the Spanish master's, but no less humanity or intensity.

Some of the early pictures are arresting for their sheer peculiarity—take the Chrysler Museum's weird, brushy fragment, *Bather and Rock* (1867–69), a chunky male nude with massive buttocks whose pose declares Cézanne's awareness of Courbet's controversial female bather of 1853 (Montpellier, Musée Fabre)—the one with the amazing haunches who steps out of shallow pool, reaching toward a wildly gesticulating, fully clothed woman, seated on the bank. Cézanne's *The Rape* (1867, Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum) reprises the pose as a (possibly) necrophiliac fantasy of ruddy male flesh and a ghastly white—limp—female body, this ambiguous abduction set in a glowing, thickly painted blue-green landscape that evokes Delacroix. Oddest of all may be the Musée d'Orsay's updated version of a Venetian fête champêtre, *Pastorale (Idyll)* (1870), a wonderful, albeit perverse, little picture, built out of dramatic contrasts of color and tone, in which absolutely none of the participants seems to be having a good time.

Since Cézanne destroyed many of his early works, it's impossible to know exactly what he achieved during this formative period. The retrospective makes clear, however, that the apparent maladroitness of the early bacchanals, like the overloading of the

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still lifes or the stiffness of the portraits, resulted not from ineptness but from Cézanne's lifelong quest for an intensity that would trigger the same powerful feelings as what he called his own "sensations" in the face of actuality, and for an underlying, fundamental sense of order and rationality. The seeming left-handedness of the early pictures reflects not poor draftsmanship but lack of interest in conventional techniques. The lapidary drawing of the Academy was antithetical to Cézanne, whose stammering lines are not boundaries but traces of planes that slip away from the viewer's line of sight. He could produce creditable if bizarrely proportioned "academies" on demand, according to the evidence of a couple of student drawings in the show, although it's plain that he aspired not to convincing illusionism but rather to a revelation of mass and density through the character of paint and painting themselves. (It's also true that this most radical of painters attempted—and failed—the entrance examination for the Ecole des Beaux-arts, and annually submitted works to the Salon, suffering annual rejection except for one aberration in 1882.)

The show makes clear, too, that the extravagance of Cézanne's early work is not atypical. The same pounding emotion is present, just below the surface, in even the driest of his mature paintings, detached from explicit reference, transformed into ferocious scrutiny, and disguised as scrupulous modulation of tones. What's remarkable is that Cézanne was able to subdue the anarchy of his early paintings and channel his emotion, subordinating it into painterly concerns. But contradictory as always, his paintings of the 1880s and '90s are both tense and assured; they bear witness to accomplishment and struggle, detachment and discomfort.

The exhibition's portraits, especially, reveal still other moods, most conspicuously in the paintings of the artist's family. An enchanting little picture of his son, Paul (1883–85, Musée de l'Orangerie), sets the rounded smoothness of a lovingly observed young face against a swollen dark red form we recognize from other pictures as the back of a chair. The portraits of Hortense Fiquet, who became Mme. Cézanne—the artist's most frequent and most patient model—are as rigorous in their probings of form as the portraits of pipe smokers and cardplayers, but they are also tender studies of a familiar, clear, plain face, a solemn oval under tidily parted hair. (Once, unexpectedly, Mme. Cézanne is shown with loose hair, her dress, however, still neatly buttoned to the chin.) Cézanne's self-portraits are even more revealing. Witness the exhibition's trio from the mid-1870s: in the Musée d'Orsay's boldly stroked, jaunty picture, the artist looks almost directly at the viewer, while in the Phillips Collection's sketchy, cooler image, he retreats, and in a version from a private collection in Paris, he glances side-long, withdrawn, tucking in his chin. (This last was one of the surprises of the show, the black-clad torso of the painter a tall, conical mass below a small, vigorously inflected head, the whole set against a strangely convoluted pattern of rose and cream.)

None of this suggests the dispassionate treatment of the figure as object attributed to Cézanne by art-history texts, which is not to say that he didn't require his sitters to behave like still-life objects. Since what is known of Cézanne suggests that he was ill at ease with most people, especially women, suspicious that anyone who tried to get close to him wanted "to get his hooks in," it's not surprising that he should wish his sitters to be self-effacing and immobile. He painted Vollard's portrait, in 1899 (Musée du Petit Palais), and the dealer later recounted perching in a chair balanced precariously on a crate, forbidden to move and enjoined not to speak, every day from eight A.M. until eleven thirty, with only the briefest rest periods; after 115 sittings—ended only because Cézanne made one of his periodic returns to Aix—the painter is supposed to have said, "I am not displeased with the shirtfront."

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Cézanne's frequently quoted remark shouldn't be taken too literally, but it does suggest the rigor of his approach. It suggests, too, the deep-seated anxiety that reverberates through his pictures, coexisting with but not eclipsing their intelligence and authority, an anxiety that prompted the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to title an incisive essay "Cézanne's Doubt." The disquieting quality of some of the portraits, like their sense of introspection, may be due to the constraints that Cézanne imposed on his sitters or it may be an echo of the painter's own "doubt," his own discomfort.

Whatever the psychological overtones of the portrait of Vollard, it's an impressive picture that holds its own among the exhibition's spectacular late portraits. They include the Musée d'Orsay's stunning *Gustave Geffroy* (1895–96) and *Woman with a Coffeepot* (*c.* 1895), in which the figures are locked into place by their surroundings—rows of books, a writing table, a paneled door, the powerful vertical axis of a coffee spoon—and the Metropolitan Museum's masterpiece *Mme. Cézanne in a Yellow Armchair* (1893–95), in which the narrow centralized figure in her red dress is tipped by the intensity of the artist's gaze, but stabilized by the twin brackets of a boldly swagged drape and a severely geometric mantelpiece.

If the portraits reveal the breadth of Cézanne's emotional range, the exhibition's still lifes and landscapes are testimony to the sharpness of his focus and the single-mindedness of his obsessions. In the still lifes, a flowered pitcher, a compote, a painted sugar bowl, a tapestry curtain start to become as familiar as Mme. Cézanne's oval face and tightly dressed hair. Cézanne was attached to his objects and apparently comforted by them, carrying them with him whenever he shuttled between Aix and Paris. Their familiarity liberated him and allowed him to concentrate on larger pictorial issues, so that the seemingly unassuming pictures he based on them are, in fact, among the most monumental and complex in the history of modernism—something that comes as no surprise but is reiterated by the Paris retrospective. From the early adamantine *Still Life with Tea Pot* (1869–70, Musée d'Orsay), with its nod to the Spanish masters via Manet, to the late piles of skulls, the show emphasizes the extraordinary double function of still life for Cézanne as a vehicle for formal research and a carrier of metaphor. The space of the still lifes expands and contracts; forms strain toward us as though striving to reveal every aspect of their being. A spill of fruit across a crumpled cloth becomes a landscape; crockery becomes architecture, onions and apples become geologic forms, and a ruck of fabric, a surrogate mountain. The art historian Meyer Schapiro has even argued that for the notoriously timid Cézanne the apples of his still lifes were equivalents for the breasts of the nudes in his early bacchanals. (There are also arguments for equating apples with femaleness, onions with maleness, but that's another matter.) Yet it is also clear that what concerned Cézanne most was neither the anecdotal history of his objects nor their function as metaphor but the essential character of their forms, the underlying geometry that he advised his young painter friend Emile Bernard to seek in his famous advice to "treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone."

Not surprisingly, the astonishing *Still Life with Plaster Cupid* (*c.* 1895, Courtauld Institute Galleries, London) reasserted its claim to be one of the most fascinating and prescient works in all of modernism. The subject is one an Academy student might have encountered: a cast of a Renaissance sculpture. But the painting is compellingly irrational. Cézanne frequently courted ambiguity in his still lifes, setting bunches of flowers and bowls of fruit against patterned cloths and busy wallpapers, but the Courtauld picture goes beyond the ambiguous into the disorienting. The relation of foreground objects to the stacked canvases of the background, and what is ostensibly depicted on them, eludes logic. Scale shifts.

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Distinctions blur between the two- and the three-dimensional, between the real and the fictive. The tabletop, as in so many of Cézanne's still lifes, tips, while the forms of the sculpture loom at us and then slip away, and space warps and fragments, as though responding to the articulations of the Cupid. These intensely serious visual games force you to meditate on the enigmatic enterprise of making two-dimensional images that supposedly correspond to your experience of a three-dimensional world, and the subject of the picture becomes the act of seeing and, by extension, the nature of perception itself.

The range of the exhibition's landscapes make it hard to believe that the same hand painted the crisp, firmly structured "Impressionist" pictures of the late 1870s and '80s and the pulsating, loosely painted (but no less solid) images of his last decade. Yet the impulse is the same. The shimmering brushmarks of Cézanne's earlier works may seem related to Impressionism's broken stroke and divided color, but they really serve to diagram the relation of form—or space—to the painter's eye. You can follow Cézanne's careful examination of the angles of roofs, the swell of foliage, the furrows of rocks, along the nervous path of his probing brush. The skin of paint seems to bulge into a kind of illusory relief that paradoxically seems perfectly congruent with the flat surface of the canvas, not a depiction of something observed but an equivalent for experience. In the late landscapes, a steady all-over rhythm of wedge-shaped marks dominates, a dense, vibrating orchestration of colored planes, crashing chords of warm and cool that magically call up the flat sweep of a plain, the enormous flank of a mountain, the mobile bulk of tree tops, without looking specifically like any of those things. The autumnal color of these late works seems independent of place or season, serving only to suggest visual weight.

Yet Cézanne's landscapes are unshakeably specific, utterly dependent on the colors, textures, light, and space of his native Provence, an arid, bony landscape of bleached limestone that, like the painter himself, is both austere and deeply sensuous. The stony terrain, perfumed with rosemary, lavender, and the scent of pignon pines, seems a fitting setting for a painter of passionate bacchanals who turned that passion into a judicious weighing of tonal nuances. The light in Aix is fierce in summer, flattening details and carving out essentials. Even deep shade is luminous, brilliant. Curiously, Cézanne is supposed to have disliked painting in sunshine—at least at the end of his life—preferring gray days. "Light," he wrote in 1904, "does not exist for a painter," maintaining that what we classify as "light, half-tone, or quarter-tone" are not tones at all, but "color sensations."

The landscapes in the retrospective emphasize Cézanne's fidelity to particular places, from his early sojourns in Auvers and Pontoise, where he worked closely with his friend Pissarro, to his later forays to the Mediterranean. What fascinated him most, of course, were a handful of places in and around Aix: the Bibémus Quarry, the family house at Jas de Bouffan, the Château Noir, and, most of all, Mont Sainte-Victoire. Over more than two decades, Cézanne painted "his" mountain, sometimes pulling back, so that its unmistakable profile rises in the distance, sometimes coming so close that it swells toward the viewer. At the Grand Palais, the first series of pictures of Mont Sainte-Victoire, from the 1880s—the Metropolitan's marvelous picture with the railroad viaduct is one of these—is hung so that you follow the painter's meanderings along the road to Bellevue. Whatever the vantage point, Mont Sainte-Victoire is a broad, matriarchal presence, a kind of abstracted mother-goddess crouched protectively above the long plain. What's perhaps most remarkable is how the mass of the mountain retains its integrity, even in the most fragmented of Cézanne's last views of the motif, such as the Philadelphia Museum's (1902–4), in which the flat, wooded plain, its tile-roofed buildings, and the looming mountain become a fraying tap-

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estry of broad touches, all held parallel to the surface of the canvas, but still precisely evocative of a particular place. (The Pushkin Museum's slightly later, darker version, from the same view, may be as good or better, but it has been seriously compromised by too much varnish; the other late, dark masterpiece in the show, *Château Noir* [1900–4, National Gallery, Washington], has fared better.)

Good as the selection of other themes may be in the Paris retrospective, the show's real strength is in the bathers. One of its triumphs was the pairing of the Museum of Modern Art's renowned standing male bather (1885), hands on hips, with a smaller, earlier version from a private collection, where the figure stretches his arms diagonally across the painting and into space. As a group, the odd, uningratiating bathers are evidence of Cézanne's lifelong hope, as he wrote to Bernard, "of painting a living Poussin in the open air, with color and light, instead of one of those works imagined in the studio, where everything has the brown color of feeble daylight without reflections from the sky and the sun." While he may have wished to tackle what he called "the project of doing Poussin over entirely from nature" large scale, most of his life Cézanne painted small canvases of groups of bathers, like becalmed versions of the early bacchanals and allegories, with the sexes usually carefully segregated. Despite their small size, they are often monumental pictures, some notable for the solidity and heft, others fascinating for their fragmentation.

Picasso and Matisse both owned small bathers—both are in the exhibition—and clearly learned a great deal from them. They would have loved the octagon room in the Grand Palais where a series of bathers from the 1870s, including theirs, were installed with some of the last perfervid narrative pictures of the period. And they would have certainly approved of the last section, where it was possible to see, together, the *Large Bathers* that Cézanne executed at the end of his life, from the National Gallery, London (1894–1905), and from the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1906). (A third [1895–1906], belongs to the Barnes Foundation, as does the most ambitious of the cardplayers; it's worth noting that none of this collection's Cézannes, after having been shipped around the world for healthy rental fees, is in the retrospective.) The pair of *Large Bathers* stops you in your tracks. They are strikingly different, the London picture dense and weighty as a Giotto, the Philadelphia version no less solemn and massive but full of air, with slender human limbs and tree branches bending to the same rhythms, torsos and tree trunks swelling and narrowing to the same dimensions; the same repetitive touch—slowly deposited patches of pigment, all oriented the same way—and the same nervous drawing—stuttering marks that track the path of a surface as it slips around a form—conspire to knit together naked bodies and forested riverbanks. They are pictures that at once sum up the entire tradition of heroic figure painting in Western art and point ahead to the future of that tradition—and perhaps, even, to its demise, to the radical deconstruction of the very masses and volumes, the pregnant space that Cézanne strove all his life as a painter to evoke.

In their brief introductory essay to the exhibition catalogue, the curators, Françoise Cachin, director of the Musées nationaux, and Joseph J. Rishel, curator of European painting and sculpture of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, observe that "to take on Cézanne is to enter a sacred precinct." Their intention, they declare, is not to reveal a new Cézanne, or to furnish new clues, but simply to celebrate his astonishing achievement. They have succeeded admirably.

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What Gore remembers

by John Simon

Gore Vidal is a slick novelist, impressive essayist, and perfect bitch. All three of these skills come in handy in his memoir, *Palimpsest*.[1] The gossip in it is rivetingly indiscreet; the nonfiction writing—as in descriptions of places and people he was indifferent to—evocative and entertaining; and the fiction—as in accounts of himself—smooth to the point of slipperiness. *Palimpsest* is, apparently, a collaboration. A picture at the beginning shows Vidal with a white cat crouching on his shoulder. The caption reads, "The memoirist in 1992. I am about to start writing this book in Ravello, aided by the white cat." And indeed, reversing the formula, he got the cat's tongue. A dubious proposition as a memoir, *Palimpsest* is awesome as a catty gossip column.

There are, to be sure, many ways to write a memoir—almost as many, I should think, as there are to skin, or collaborate with, a cat. But as there are also many ways to review a memoir, let me lay my cards on the table. I have had my innings with Gore Vidal, as who in this trade hasn't? I will relate three incidents for the readers' consideration.

David Susskind once decided that, in the wake of televised confrontations between Vidal and others, it was time for his going *mano a mano* with me on an entire "Open End"—the David Susskind show, which could go on for hours. Having had me on before, Susskind called me again to ask if I was willing. "Sure," I said, "but Vidal will never agree." "Why not?" "Because he is chicken." David laughed this off. Soon, though, he called me back: "You were right; he won't do it." "And why not?" "Why should he make you famous, he says." Not quite logical, this. Either I am a worthy opponent, then why not do it? Or I am an incompetent, in which case Vidal wipes the floor with me. The upstart sinks into instant oblivion, blood-starved TV audiences are gleeful, and Gore is in his glory.

Vidal had published an essay in *Commentary* titled "Literary Gangsters," a clever synonym for his unfawning reviewers, myself among them. Reprinted in all his essay collections, it reads in part: "Other gangsters today? John Simon was lovingly noted. A Yugoslav with a proud if Serbian style (or is it Croatian?—in any case, English is his third language), Mr. Simon has for twenty years slashed his way through literature, theater, cinema." There follows, in Vidal's customary bravura polemical style, my bracketing with Gilles de Rais, Charlie Manson, and Lyndon Johnson. Although reading this has given me exquisite pleasure, I regret to say it hasn't made me famous.

The third time this essay was gathered in a volume, Vidal affixed a footnote after "his third language": "Mr. Simon has since instructed us that English is his fifth language." In what may prove to be the final,

1 *Palimpsest: A Memoir*, by Gore Vidal; Random House, 435 pages, $27.50.

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ne varietur version of the piece, as reprinted in the 1,300-page modestly titled *United States: Essays 1952–1992*, Vidal has seen fit to omit the footnote. Fate chastised him with a typo: "English in [*sic*] his third language," a matter of no great consequence, except as it proves that, at least as a proofreader, Vidal has not yet attained perfection.

Finally, some years ago, when I was language columnist for *Esquire*, I published something that offended Vidal. In "The Good and Bad of Gore Vidal," I wrote, "Vidal is an essayist of talent. I am not sure that I would bestow on him the mantle of Matthew Arnold or Edmund Wilson, as Stephen Spender does . . . nor am I quite convinced that 'Vidal's paradoxes at their best rival Oscar Wilde's best,' as Edmund White asserts. . . . But the new collection contains some very good pieces, as weighty as anything in Oscar Wilde and easily as witty as the best of Matthew Arnold." Vidal, ignoring for once the risk of contributing to my fame, dashed off a sharply critical reply. After expatiating at some length on my unworthiness, it ended in a palinode: for all my flagrant shortcomings, I was still one of the few civilized literary journalists in America. I took this to be less a compliment to me than a cautionary slap at all the rest.

Sorry about this lengthy exordium, but people should be alerted to the possibility that, in reviewing *Palimpsest*, I may be guilty, despite all my efforts to the contrary, of revanchisme, a quality readers of Vidal's oeuvre should be well acquainted with. So, to be fair, I admit up front: I mistrust Gore Vidal as autobiographer, and rather than summarize the book in a conventional review (which you could easily get elsewhere), will raise the larger, and perhaps more relevant, issue of his modus operandi and ultimate credibility.

The main elements of *Palimpsest* can be labeled (*a*) family and school reminiscences (hates mother, likes father and grandparents, has little use for school); (*b*) recollections of wartime service (mostly easy cohabitations with fellow servicemen); (*c*) the love-hate relationship with the Kennedys (Jackie was a stepsister), with whom he appears to have been on good terms much of the time; (*d*) complex, idiosyncratic sexuality, and the way it has been, most of the time, satisfied; (*e*) aspirations to political office—even dreams of the presidency—without ever winning an election, and the resultant disenchantment with politics; (*f*) literary activities in the theater, television, cinema, and in the writing of fiction and nonfiction; (*g*) famous people known, and gossip about them; and (*h*) two special relationships—with Howard Austen and Jimmie Trimble.

To start with, two details where I have privileged information. We read that Rosalind, a girlfriend and potential wife, "vanished into marriage [with another] but I saw a good deal of her friend Cornelia Claiborne, a pretty girl with gray-blue hyperthyroid eyes and an interest in literature. She was helping to start a literary paper, *The Hudson Review*. I was roped into escorting her to a mass coming-out party at the Waldorf for those girls, deprived by war, of what used to be called debuts." The rest of the paragraph is devoted to the first meeting with James Merrill, a subject of greater interest to Vidal; Cornelia is never mentioned again. Three years later, I escorted Corky, as she was known, to a party at the American Embassy in Paris, and she rather talked my block off about whether or not she should marry Gore Vidal. Since she was neither a liar nor a fool, she must have, dying young and unmarried, deserved more than half a paragraph in a memoir of well over four hundred pages that stops with Vidal *anno aetatis suae* thirty-nine.

Again, in a passage about Saul Bellow, and in particular *Herzog*, Vidal talks about Valentine, the villain of that novel. "The original of Valentine, the adulterer, was Saul's most devoted admirer, Eckermann to Saul's Goethe. He was some sort of writer-teacher, long since forgotten. I can still remember the afternoon when the president of Bard introduced him to me because, 'you are both writers,' and Valentine said, in his

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thick impenetrable English—he was German, I think—'At least *I* write English.' As it proved, he was optimistic." Now, both Valentine and I were teaching in the same department at Bard at the time. His being pilloried in the novel for having bedded and wedded one of those wives Bellow kept shedding like so many snakeskins seemed a mite harsh—especially in view of the veneration in which the real-life Valentine continued to hold Bellow ever after. This man was Jack Ludwig, a Canadian, whose accent was every bit as good as Vidal's, and rather less affected.

Teutonization and demonization of Ludwig, especially after his many visits to Vidal's nearby home, Edgewater (on one of which I, too, was present), is not to be condoned in a memorialist. How concerned *is* Vidal with the truth? Early on in the book he writes, "I have pretty much kept to my system of recording only what a faulty memory recalls (and the written—equally faulty?—memories and biographies of others)," but adds that he has on one occasion requested help from a library. Is that enough? When he confides, "I am told that I have an eidetic imagination (I can summon up vivid scenes, recalled or invented, in my head)," one notices that memory and fantasy are given equal status. On meeting John Osborne, Vidal asks "about his two-volume memoir, 'Did you take notes or keep a diary?' 'Good God, no! . . . Actually, I think I make it all up.' "

This is not comforting to the book's readers, nor is Vidal's statement, "My own tendency to lie is seldom indulged in except when picking up a stranger." Anaïs Nin, one of the few women with whom Vidal seems to have had an extended sexual relationship, wanted him to write about her, "but although I can perjure myself in a short blurb for a book, I cannot sustain deceit over any great critical length." How about autobiographical length? He wonders why he bothered keeping track of the lies of Truman Capote (hatred of whom, in these pages, runs second only to that of Vidal's own mother), but explains it with "a constitutional dislike of liars, not to mention Truman himself." This bolsters our confidence a bit, until we reach "lying is the worst of sins, but there are times when it forestalls what the Bird [Vidal's nickname for his intimate, Tennessee Williams] regarded as the *very* worst of sins, gratuitous cruelty." Since examples of the latter abound in *Palimpsest*, we might assume that the memorialist preferred unkindness to untruth, though we can't dismiss the possibility of his having found a way of reconciling the two.

We come now to a crucial utterance: "Today an ambitious writer would be well advised to label any work of his imagination nonfiction, or, perhaps, a memoir." (The context is a lament for the death of the novel, a leitmotif of the book, to which I'll return.) And, of course, we must allow for a certain irony that runs through the writing—a kind of amused half-light in which the contours of narrative honesty and license to embellish are jokily blurred. Yet aren't certain jokes confessions? Invitations to be caught out without being fully disprovable? The tone here is a neat balancing act between, "Don't you recognize a joke when you hear one?" and "How many times must I underline a point for you to get it?" Near the end of the book, Vidal reiterates, "Again, I note that only the novel can ever be true."

But even a novelist can surely have a little truth left over for his memoirs. Vidal's ways of not telling it are as diverse as they are grandiose. There are times, for example, when we feel that the author knows too much to be trusted. Never mind, say, that we are told that, on a school trip to Europe, Gore and his chums were in Downing Street watching Neville Chamberlain head for Westminster "to say that war is now at hand." Or that, returning to the States on the *Antonia*, the boys watched its sister ship, the *Athenia*, being torpedoed by a German sub. Unlikely, but possible. What about other cases, though, where Vidal's omniscience is a bit too rampant? He says about

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Eleanor Roosevelt and FDR, "certainly he hurt her mortally in their private relationship." Mrs. Roosevelt seems to have been friendly with him, but would she have let this out? And is that "mortally" consistent with her style?

Or take the following, about the Kennedys. "I think Jackie's dislike of Grace began when she and Jack were looking at the press coverage of the wedding in Monaco. Jack studied the pictures intently; then frowned and said, 'I could have married her!' Jackie's face was again tear-stained." For anyone to write this, he must have been present, yet Vidal, so quick to boast, does not say he was there. And had he been, would JFK, who knew him well enough, have committed such a faux pas?

And what about the casually tossed-off, "had I known to what extent J. Edgar Hoover was blackmailing the Kennedy brothers," with no further elaboration? Or take this passage, beginning with one of Vidal's favorite refrains about JFK's warmongering out of lust for glory, which "he was about to achieve anyway by falling victim to a gangland plot. The ultimate irony is that the elements that did him in—the Marcello mob in New Orleans and so on—were the kind of people that his father had comfortably done business with all his life." Vidal wants us to believe he knows exactly who did in Kennedy, but can't be bothered to go into all those tiresome details. And notice also the characteristic Samurai swordsmanship: with one swift swish of the blade, he gets both son and father. Again, about the Windsors: "Only Wallis knew how to control the Duke's premature ejaculation." Was Gore hiding under the bed? Yet, at other times, what fastidious shyness! His father, Gore is told by his mother, had three balls. But "I never dared look—you don't look at parents." Only at Windsors, in bed.

Closely related to inattention to truth is cavalier sloppiness about English and other tongues, particularly offensive from someone who, while pretending to superior culture, neglects his own writerly tool, language. To start with the poor English, which Vidal, the autodidact who skipped college, cannot even blame on academia. We get "intrigued" (for fascinated), "quo-pro-quid" (for quid pro quo), "equinoctal" (for equinoctial), "at Milton Klein's, our dentist" (for dentist's), "paraphrastic" (for periphrastic), "the people who comprised" (the whole comprises the parts, not the other way round), "echt-American writers as Hawthorne" (for like), "masterful gift" (for masterly), "center around" (for on), "except for Tennessee and Bowles and Louis Auchincloss, I never got to know many of my contemporaries" (for any), "a deep affinity . . . exacerbated by" (only bad things can be exacerbated), "unlike the Jimmie play, I don't much care for this one" (a dangler), "Niggers" (for niggers—you can't eat your P.C. and have it too), "of varying degrees" (for degree), "could not help but feel" (for could not help feeling), "Roger L. Stevens, tycoon and sometime producer" (for sometimes—he never gave it up), "Russell was meant to be him" (for he), "better to worship a false image . . . than that sky-god religion" (faulty parallelism—you can worship a sky-god, but not a religion), and so on.

He is equally poor at foreign languages he keeps throwing around: there is Gide saying, "Premier le Kinsey Report et après le Prix Nobel" (for *d'abord*); "de Montherlant" and "de Sade" (for Montherlant and Sade); "Ce n'est plus une ardeur dans mes veines cachées" (for *cachée*—the ardor, not the veins, is hidden); "malòcchio" (for *malocchio*—an absurdly misplaced accent from someone who's been living in Italy for decades); "acte gratuite" (for *gratuit*); "Vidal is a common name in every Latin country, as it derives from *vitalis*, the genitive of the word for life"—which, of course, is *vitae*.

And what of the general misinformation Vidal tosses about with grand insouciance? Thus "Hieronymous" Bosch, Marlowe's "Faust," a ballet "adage" (for adagio), "Raimond" for Raimund von Hofmanns-

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thal, the writer "Leslie Blanche" (for Lesley Blanch), and so on.

There is a basic disrespect here for the values Vidal purports to be upholding, as well as flagrant indifference to other people. Yet what bemoaning of the lack of culture, of the loss of literacy and the impending, or already incurred, death of the novel. "I am plainly at the end of the road. So, I suspect, is literature." No one realized at "Vance Bourjaily's gatherings, that we had arrived on the scene to witness the end of the novel." Again, "now no one does much of any book reading." And, "today's publishers are reluctant to publish first novels by anyone who has not been, at the very least, a movie star or a serial killer." Or: "In those days works of literature were often popular, something no longer possible." Partly, Vidal seems to deplore his declining sales and insufficient fame; partly, he relishes the notion of having been the last important novelist. "I am American literature," he tells Christopher Isherwood.

The self-idolizing and mythicizing begins with his physique. *Palimpsest* features in front (on the binding, under the translucent dust jacket) a full-page, or full-cover, head shot of the young memorialist, giving a lie to the adage that you can't judge a book by its cover. "I am mesmerized by the tributes to my beauty that keep cropping up in the memoirs of that period," writes Narcissus, affecting sweetly shy surprise. Though he assures us of his "lifelong reluctance to read anything about myself," and affirms that "there does come a time when one stops reading about oneself," he can make exceptions for, say, the memoirs of Cecilia Sternberg, in which she asks about Gore, "Is he by any chance the boy who looks like an archaic Apollo?" and her cousin, Count Eddie Bismarck (the chancelor's grandson), replies, "Why, so he does, rather, though his wits are far from archaic."

Now, you—or Gore—might claim that some of this is adduced in jest. But it is neither funny nor infrequent enough to be lightly dismissed. We read, for instance, that "Myron and Myra Breckinridge would explode on the world scene as not only saviors of MGM but of the human race as well." Anaïs Nin and Gore together were like "a very mature Marie Corelli and a very young Jonathan Swift—well, Mencken . . ." At sixty-seven, Vidal proclaims himself "a movie star." Furthermore, "I had been brought up with far more famous people than the old writers to whom I was . . . paying homage." The king of Malaysia has (and is no doubt famous for) a "father who once gave me lunch in Johore, where he was sultan."

At the Washington Rotunda, where he is being shot for a documentary, Vidal mingles with tourists "several [of whom] ask for my autograph." Noam Chomsky likes his novel *Creation*; Jack Kerouac puts him in *The Subterraneans* as Arial Lavaline. When he and Kerouac check into the Chelsea Hotel for a night of sex, "I told the bemused clerk that this register would become famous . . . We [Vidal and Kerouac, not the clerk] owed it to literary history to couple." Sir Frederick Ashton affects to be in love with Gore. While his ambitious literary contemporaries read "thin Hawthorne or wafer-thin Hemingway," Gore, late at night, "read straight through Meredith and Peacock; and felt at home in their company." I wonder how they would have felt in his. Republished by Victor Weybright, *The City and the Pillar* sells a million copies (hmm?), "a large number in those days." He publishes an attack on Israel, and claims to have started "what was called Vidalgate," which makes him the first man to have given himself the gate.

An elderly Hudson Valley neighbor, Alice Dows, writes, "he is handsome, yes, I had long ago conceded this point; there was no denying his crisp good looks and his dimpled smile." Later, "she was buried with my letters." Elaine Dundy, Kenneth Tynan's first wife, confesses in her memoirs to having been in love with Gore. A party at the Tynans, attended by Vidal and Antonioni among others, inspires the movie *Blow-Up*. (From the way Vidal describes the party, this is hardly apparent.) At a literary

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conference in the Soviet Union, both Anthony Powell and C. P. Snow are awed by Vidal. "In the early primaries, most of the substance of Jerry Brown's speeches was my work, and Clinton hated Brown, though not enough for him to refrain from taking over some of Jerry's—my—best lines. Later, ecumenically, I sent Clinton material for his debates with Bush."

"Had it not been for me, Ronald Reagan would never have been president." When Vidal's movie *The Best Man* was being cast, Gore didn't think Reagan right for an Adlai Stevensonish character. Melvyn Douglas got the part, and "his career was hugely revived, while the rejected Reagan, at a loose end, became governor of California." When Vidal is told that, for services rendered, JFK would give him "something," the proud response is, "I couldn't think of anything that I wanted other than Jack's job, plainly not destined for me." Whose was the greater loss: Vidal's or the country's?

At last, though, Vidal is rewarded for choosing to be a novelist first and foremost. In Rome, with his companion Howard Austen, he is at the heart of literature. Two blocks to the north, Thomas Mann wrote *Buddenbrooks*. Nearby, too, had lived and worked George Eliot, Ariosto, Stendhal. "I myself wrote at least part of several books in this flat, as well as all of *Myra Breckinridge* . . . . Italo Calvino lived at the north end of the street, and we used to *cher confrère* each other when we met." The way Vidal describes it, it is rather like those Hollywood maps showing tourists how to find the homes of the stars.

But self-aggrandizement is not enough; one must also minimize the competition. There is "our young cousin [Albert Gore] who currently lives in vice-presidential obscurity, a sort of family ghost flickering dimly on prime-time television." "As Joe [Alsop] was an expert on everything, he was generally wrong on almost everything." Could this be true of other universal experts as well? Or take the description of John Lehmann, a friend and publisher of Gore's: "Sexually, it was his pleasure to beat working-class boys; otherwise, he lived a life of perfect domestic virtue with a ballet dancer called Alexis Racine, an uncommonly plain, uncommonly effeminate man." Evelyn Waugh was "a drunken social climber who wrote small funny novels of no great appeal." This screed goes on, and then makes fun of Waugh's post-*Brideshead*-on-TV popularity, which made him "to English literature what Winston Churchill is to politics, and written about at endless length, as if here were a great writer, like James Joyce or Rupert Everett." Note how envy reeks from every Vidal pore, so that in a jab at Waugh even Joyce ends up belittled by being bracketed with the effete movie actor Rupert Everett.

Allen Ginsberg tells Vidal that Kerouac "was rather proud . . . that he blew you," and, indeed, a description of Vidal's brutal buggering of Kerouac is the most distasteful episode of this tasteless memoir. Lionel Trilling? "Anyone who could write a book about E. M. Forster and not be aware of his intense, almost religious, faggotry, is not much in the way of a critic." It all depends, I suppose, on whether you practice literary or bedroom criticism. Greta Garbo, a good friend, does not escape Vidal's malice, perhaps motivated by vagina envy. Garbo is described admiring the breasts of Irwin Shaw's girlfriend, whom she gets to bare them for her. "Garbo's own," we read, "hung very low." Ken Tynan, a rival in outrageous wit, must be humbled: "Ken was tall and languid, very much an Oxonian queen who preferred women to men; hence Ken was fondly regarded by us all as one of nature's innate and unalterable lesbians." How fond can regard get?

Of JFK: "Jack seemed—and indeed was—mildly decrepit. He moved stiffly when he did not limp painfully from a bad back: war wound was the official line; touch football, the reality. . . . Jack's skin was a curious bronze color that at first looked to be the result of a suntan, but then, when we caught the odd yellow glint, it looked like

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makeup. Actually, the color was a manifestation of Addison's disease."

Bobby Kennedy, who disliked Vidal, comes off worse: "Between Bobby's primitive religion and his family's ardent struggle ever upward from Irish bog, he was more than usually skewed, not least by his own homosexual impulses, which, Nureyev once told me, were very much in the air on at least one occasion when they were together. 'Nothing happen,' said Rudi. 'But we did share young soldier once. *American* soldier. Boy not lie . . . *maybe*.' " Well, both Bobby and Rudi are dead, and cannot contest allegations; even so, it all hangs on a *maybe*. And how does Vidal bolster up a case more sagging than Garbo's breasts? "Yet anyone who has eleven children must be trying to prove—disprove?—something other than the ability to surpass his father as incontinent breeder." After which, to hedge his bets, Vidal makes a joky reference to Catholicism. But the doubt has been cast.

Jackie, who was mostly nice to Gore, fares worst. After a long discussion of her craving for publicity (look who's talking!), there comes this demure two-way blow of the Samurai sword: "Actually, to be fair, she loved money even more than publicity and her life was dedicated to acquiring it through marriage." Note, please, that Judas-kissy "to be fair." There follows an account of how she "lost her virginity to a friend of mine in a lift that he had stalled in a *pension* on Paris's Left Bank," a chap she couldn't marry although "he came from a better family than hers," because "he had no money." Elsewhere, however, in the spirit of Christian forgiveness, Vidal writes, "Once, after I was blown by an old man of, perhaps, thirty—my absolute cut-off age—he offered me ten dollars, which I took. As a result I, alone in the family, did not condemn Jackie's marriage to Onassis." A quo-pro-quid? And even such a very close friend as Tennessee Williams doesn't escape Vidal's (or the white cat's) tongue when our author, after mentioning Tenn's grief for a dead ex-lover, adds, "The Bird would mourn Frank ever after, quite forgetting that he had thrown him out several years earlier."

Which brings us to the slipperiest aspect of these memoirs: Vidal and sex. On the one hand, like so many homosexuals, he wants us to believe that the whole world is actually or covertly or potentially homosexual. On the other, he and his likes are not really homosexual at all. We read: "Like most men, I am attracted to adolescent males." In the armed services during the war, "most of the boys knew that they would soon be home for good, and married, and that this was the last chance to do what they were designed to do with each other. . . . It was my experience, in the war, that just about everyone, either actively or passively, was available under the right circumstances." And, of course, there is "a beauty and fulfillment in sex with strangers that one seldom enjoys with people one knows." "Most young men, particularly attractive ones, have sexual relations with their own kind." Already at school, "What we were all up to was a perfectly natural homoeroticism, which some continued for the rest of their lives without lapsing into the physically more complex homosexuality or, for whatever reason, into *serious* heterosexuality." Note that "for whatever reason"—presumably not a very good one.

Now for the distaff side. "Alla Nazimova [was] a somber actress of almost unendurable power who reigned over Hollywood's lesbian world, which included, I have been assured, just about every woman star or star's wife." So, too, Jackie Kennedy was fascinated by a lesbian bar in Provincetown, "but dared not look in." But women, straight or not, are of lesser interest to the casuist from Ravello, even though he has consistently refused to call himself homosexual. Instead, he has opted variously for bisexual, same-sexual (probably unaware that *homo* is the Greek for same), and homosexualist, as well as homoerotic, as here. All of these, it seems, mean something other than homosexual. At nineteen, Vidal picked up a merchant mariner for sex, but

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when the fellow tried to bugger him, Gore violently fought him off. "That," he tells us, "was my first and last experience of being nearly fucked."

So you wonder just what Vidal does (did?) in the bedroom? Alfred Kinsey congratulates him on having no sexual guilt feelings, to which the grandson of Senator T. P. Gore of Oklahoma and stepson of Hugh D. Auchincloss haughtily replies that none of his family suffer from that "middle-class disorder from which power people are exempt." Dr. Kinsey then "told me that I was not 'homosexual'—doubtless because I never sucked cock or got fucked." We are to infer that he only buggers and lets himself be sucked. And indeed, that, along with rubbing together (*frottage*) is mostly what happens in the session with Jack Kerouac he describes in some detail. Nonetheless, Kinsey, on the basis of Vidal's sexual history, rates our homoeroticist "as a lower-middle-class Jew, with more heterosexual than homosexual interests," which Gore finds more applicable to Howard Austen. But whatever he is, he is "setting world records for encounters with anonymous youths, nicely matching busy Jack Kennedy's girl-a-day routine." Except that, as Vidal tells us elsewhere, JFK usually bedded two girls simultaneously.

Most of Vidal's pickups are "poor youths my own age, and often capable of an odd lovingness, odd considering that I did so little to give any of them physical pleasure. But then, even at twenty, I often paid for sex on the ground that it was only fair." He actually agrees with the despised Truman Capote when told by him, "I hear you're just the lay lousé." And he tells Anaïs Nin, apropos her efforts to arouse it in him, "Sexual jealousy is an emotion denied to me." Cold-fishiness is next to saintliness.

Forthwith, though, we are shocked to learn that Gore was, after all, *not* setting world records with his more than a thousand (*mille e tre*?) encounters by age twenty-five—"my near contemporaries Jack Kennedy, Marlon Brando, and Tennessee Williams were all keeping up." While telling about his episode with the dancer Harold Lang, who appeared with John Kriza and Jerome Robbins in *Fancy Free* (to Leonard Bernstein's music), Vidal reports Bernstein as saying, "Practically everyone I know—or used to know—liked to tell me how one thing we have in common is the cast of *Fancy Free*." To which Vidal, "Well, I did go to bed with two thirds of your cast." (As if there hadn't been women in that ballet, who, however, don't enter into the reckoning.) " 'And I,' said Lenny, competitive to the bitter end, 'went to bed with all three. But I will say Harold's ass was one of the seven—or whatever number it is—wonders of our time.' " Somehow or other, a conversation like this never appears in heterosexual memoirs.

Once again Vidal tells us that he has been as free from sexual jealousy as from envy of another writer. But then, he has "never had an affair with anyone. Sex, yes. Friendships, yes. The two combined, no." So, it seems, his emotional repertoire is as limited as his sexual one. Indeed, "the potency of other males is, for me, a turnoff." Amid all this comes an important announcement: "In those days, girls one's own age meant marriage. This made any sort of friendship with them uneasy if not impossible. Later, when I turned dramatist, I got to know actresses, and as we were all in the same business, relations entirely changed. Most of them didn't want marriage, either. I relaxed, for the first time, and enjoyed myself." From this it is impossible to tell whether what he had with actresses was friendship or sex. The wicked tease keeps us guessing.

On the evidence of this memoir—but only from the captions—we gather that he had an "amorous friendship" with Diana Lynn, a charming actress, although by all accounts I am aware of a confirmed lesbian. At a later date, he lives in Los Angeles with Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, who are lovers. "Joanne Woodward and I were nearly married, but that was at her insistence and based entirely on her passion not for me but for Paul Newman. Paul was

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taking his time about divorcing his first wife, and Joanne calculated, shrewdly as it proved, that the possibility of our marriage would give him the needed push. It did." And off the happy pair go to London on their honeymoon, accompanied by, you guessed it, Vidal and his friend Howard Austen. The four of them kept her miscarriage on the honeymoon strictly secret, lest it hurt her career.

Things finally come to order. Marlon Brando fades out of the picture as sexual competition. JFK is "rather sad these days," Gore is told by an insider. "Nothing happening except Jackie, maybe twice a week." Whereupon "I pointed out that their marriage had revived—or perhaps really begun—when he started to see her face in every newspaper; he's now taken to calling her 'the sex symbol.' Not till he saw the world's response to her did he find her interesting." From whom do you suppose Gore gleaned this information? Jack? Jackie? God?

And what about Vidal's own happy sex life? The last glimpse we are afforded—although it does go back to Rome 1948, the book having little care for chronology—reads in part: "Every evening hundreds of boys converged on the Pincio in order to make arrangements with interested parties," etc., etc. Then the paragraph makes a 180-degree turn: "If one knew two or three girls who enjoyed sex for its own sake, splendid orgies were possible . . . with no drinking permitted, or desired, as every fantasy was acted out in flesh," etc., etc. One such sex-enjoying girl testifies "that she had never before been entirely satisfied." And this joyous account stems from someone who keeps assuring us "I have never liked parties of any kind."

So much for Vidal the sensualist. What about Vidal the true lover? Two men figure importantly in *Palimpsest*. One is Howard Austen. His real name was Auster—Jewish, and consequently unpropitious for employment in advertising, his field in those days of anti-Semitism in the agencies. Vidal—another bit of information found only in the captions—told him to change just one letter, Auster to Austen, and his career took off. Austen appears early in the book, rather cryptically: "I have now lived a half century with a man, but sex has played no part in the relationship and so where there is no desire or pursuit, there is no wholeness." Later: "I was able, at twenty-five, to settle down with Howard Austen, age twenty-one. We had met anonymously at the Everard Baths. 'How,' we are often asked, 'have you stayed together for forty-four years?' The answer is, 'No sex.' This satisfies no one, of course, but there, as Henry James would say, it is."

I am sorry to have to join the ranks of the unbelievers. Clearly, Austen became a kind of amanuensis to Vidal. But what sort of companions does one pick up at the Everard Baths, a homosexual meeting and mating place? And why does one go on living with such a person for the rest of one's life? Vidal quotes Elaine Dundy referring to Howard as his "companion," which—in homosexual and perhaps even homoerotic parlance—means spouse. And whom but a spouse would one take along on a sort of double-dating honeymoon with Newman and Woodward? After this, Austen makes no further appearance in the book till the very end, where Vidal tells us, "I have just bought two small plots for Howard and me in Rock Creek Cemetery; we will be midway between Jimmie Trimble and Henry Adams—midway between heart and mind, to put it grandly." Now, it may just be possible to remain side by side platonically in life; but in eternity, surely not.

The great, the only, love of Vidal's life—if we are to believe it—was Jimmie Trimble (1925–1945). He was a boy Gore met at Exeter, had an affair with then, and, later, a one-night stand. Then Jimmie went off to the wars and died, a heroic Marine, on Iwo Jima. Gore considered him more than a lover—a twin, with whom he completed himself. And even more than that: "me," as he says in one place. A fictionalized Jimmie is the autobiographical hero's lover in *The City and the Pillar*, and he weaves his way as

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a sort of *princesse lointaine* through *Palimpsest*: a refrain, a leitmotif, the great love story that might have been. Yet even here, in a rare access of credibility, Vidal allows that "my 'unfinished business' with him would have been long since finished had he lived." And this even though "the small room where Jimmie and I had made love" is "a now-legendary room," presumably even more so than the one at the Chelsea, where Vidal and Kerouac, by coupling, paid their debt to literary history. In fact, Vidal is even posthumously jealous of Jimmie, trying to figure out who it was that, out there in the Pacific, turned him on to Walt Whitman.

We learn quite a bit about Jimmie. Some of it directly from his twin, Gore, e.g., that "his sweat smelled honey-sweet, like that of Alexander the Great." Some of it from the fallen hero's fiancée, whom Vidal spares no effort to track down. Jimmie will be reposing not far from Vidal and Austen, so that our memorialist can perhaps, like Jack Kennedy, have an "alternate" lover during that exceptionally long night. We are shown a picture of Jimmie's final resting place, which he shares with one P. Sherwood Alverson (1896–1972), about whom the book—and even the captions—stays mum. Very touchingly, however, *Palimpsest* ends by noting that "the half of me that never grew up" will be "only a few yards away." And then the work's noble penultimate sentence: "Finally, I seem to have written, for the first and last time, not the ghost story that I feared but a love story . . . ending with us whole at last in the shade of a copper beech."

You may have noticed that I have skimped on some aspects of this memoir: Vidal the fictionist, essayist, playwright, TV dramatist, screenwriter, movie actor, politician, and TV talk-show personality. It's really Gore's fault for being so much more interesting as a social butterfly, sexual athlete, and self-publicist. But I cannot refrain from adducing a sample of his literary criticism (yet another of his far-flung activities): "Although, as writers, Kerouac and Burroughs were not much different from such conventional writers as Philip Roth and John Updike, I feared that their imitators would, like the executors of some inexorable Gresham's law, drive literature itself out the window. All this proved a false alarm. Their imitators are few, while the originals either died or did not continue, and literature went out the window anyway." This should prove how interchangeable Vidal's activities are: only a talk-show pundit would manage, as it were, to lump Kerouac and Burroughs with Roth and Updike; and only a self-publicist who wants literature to end with himself would so roundly proclaim its defenestration.

But perhaps I'll get another chance to make up for my omissions. The conclusion of *Palimpsest*—a paragraph in itself—is the one word and three dots, "Meanwhile . . ." That, clearly, is the answer to the question why the memoir ends, notwithstanding countless flash-forwards, with its subject aged only thirty-nine. Doubtless a second volume will in due time enrich our shelves and vicarious lives. After all, John Osborne, whose sojourn on earth was shorter, got two volumes out of it.

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Modernist spirits: Apollinaire's "Alcools"

by Donald Lyons

The legend of Guillaume Apollinaire—jovial, manic, lewd, charismatic, Roman-nosed Apollinaire—is as potent as his work. He was born Wilhelm Albert Wladimir Alexandre Apollinaris de Kostrowitzky in Rome in 1880. His mother, Angelica Alexandrina de Kostrowitzky, was a Polish adventuress who liked to claim noble blood; his father, probably, was an Italian army officer named Francesco-Costantino-Camillo Flugi d'Aspermont, whose rich Catholic family disdained Angelica. (These murky passages have a faint flavor of Stendhal.) The boy spent his first seven years in Roman squalor until his mother, with Wilhelm and a younger brother in tow, moved to Monaco to become a "hostess" at the casino. It was thus fortuitous that the boy got a French education at all, for only in 1861 had Monaco reverted to being a French protectorate.

From 1888 to 1897 the youngster was a star pupil at Catholic boarding schools in Monaco and Cannes, taking his first communion and writing his first verses in 1892. (Now things acquire more the flavor of Humbert Humbert's childhood.) He transferred to a public *lycée* in Nice in 1897 but failed his *bac*. By seventeen, he had lost his faith, had sex, and, in the words of Scott Bates, "acquired an extraordinary knowledge of *fin-de-siècle* esoteric, erotic, and revolutionary literature." Obliged by the authorities to leave Monaco, his mother and her new protector, the Alsatian banker and gambler Jules Weil, moved the ménage north in 1899—first to a gambling spa near Stavelot in Belgium and eventually to Paris. As Roger Shattuck recounts in *The Banquet Years* (1958), "having suffered gambling losses at Spa, Madame de Kostrowitzky and Weil returned to Paris and instructed the boys to 'skip' the pension without paying the six-hundred-franc bill." There is now a monument to the defaulting poet not far from the pension.

Back in Paris in 1900 the young man toiled as a secretary and at night wrote sci-fi and porn. In 1901 a wealthy German family visiting Paris offered him a job as tutor to their eight-year-old daughter; during his subsequent year in the Rhineland as tutor, he fell unsuccessfully in love with the girl's shy, pretty, blonde English governess, Annie Playden. Back in Paris in 1902, Guillaume Apollinaire—as he now called himself—moved in with his mother, got a job in a bank, met Alfred Jarry and other literary iconoclasts, and started a magazine, *Le Festin d'Esope*, which championed, among other things, sci-fi and detective stories. As he later put it himself, they drank a lot of absinthe and learned to laugh. Twice he went to London to propose to Annie; her horrified family packed her off to America.

In October 1904 at the Criterion bar, a hangout for touts and jockeys near the Gare Saint-Lazare, Apollinaire met Pablo Picasso, twenty-three, who soon introduced him to Max Jacob, critic, poet, wit, fantasist. The

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bande à Picasso was in being: "You've heard of La Fontaine and Molière and Racine, well now that's us," claimed Jacob in accents heard in every young generation. In the excited words of Picasso's biographer John Richardson, "until he died, fourteen years after they met, Apollinaire would be a constant solace, a constant goad to Picasso. He opened up his imagination to a vast new range of intellectual stimuli: to new concepts of black humor, to the pagan past and the wilder shores of sex." The ten years before the war saw the full blossoming of Apollinaire: editor of *Revue Immoraliste* (1905); founder of the review *Les Soirées de Paris* (1912); pioneering art critic in *Chroniques d'art* (1902–18) and *Les Peintres cubistes: méditations esthétiques* (1913); novelist in *Le Poète assassiné* (1903–8), *L'Hérésiarque et Cie.* (1910), and *La Femme assise* (1912–18); pornographic novelist in *Mémoires d'un jeune Don Juan* and *Les Onze mille verges*[1] (both 1906). Not to mention, for the moment, poet.

In 1911 Apollinaire underwent what was even for him an unusual experience: on September 7 he was arrested for the theft of the *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre and spent six days in prison. It seems that, as Shattuck tells it, "one of Apollinaire's acquaintances from poorer days, who had worked briefly as his secretary, an itinerant Belgian named Géry Pieret, had twice stolen small statuettes from the Louvre out of pure bravado. He sold the first lot to Picasso and left some with Apollinaire." Pieret—and his famous friends—were innocent of the greater outrage but when it happened he unwisely went to the newspapers and all hell broke loose. The unpleasantness shook the poet, who was indeed almost deported; Picasso, characteristically, wiggled out of any implication. Then from 1907 to 1912 Apollinaire was tumultuously involved with Marie Laurencin, a "wide-eyed, mischievous, slender" painter in whom, precisely "because she both yielded to him and escaped him, he found embodied . . . the unstilled rhythm of love and disappointment which stimulated him most profoundly" (the words are Shattuck's). Nineteen thirteen was his *annus mirabilis*: April saw the publication of *Alcools: poèmes 1898–1913* and of *Les Peintres cubistes*. In December 1914 he joined the artillery; in 1916 he transferred to the infantry; in 1917 he was wounded in the head by shrapnel; in 1918 he got married, published his second important volume of verse, *Calligrammes: poèmes de la paix et de la guerre, 1913–1916*, which included shape-poems, war poems, and love poems, and died of the flu. He was buried on Armistice Day, the long cortège having to move through crowds that were shouting "*Conspuez Guillaume!*"—that is, "Spit on the Kaiser!" It was, friends thought, just the sort of thing he would have savored.

The real importance of Apollinaire is as a poet, and the place to start is with *Alcools* (pronounced *al-coal* and meaning "spirits"). The poems in that book, although not arranged chronologically and occasionally hard to date, were mainly written from 1902 to 1912 and have for immediate inspiration a cluster of themes: the poet's 1902–5 obsession with Annie Playden, his 1907–12 obsession with Marie Laurencin, Catholicism, homemade erotic-hermetic substitutes for Catholicism, modern technology, Paris.

Two recent books offer an opportunity to think about Apollinaire's poetic accomplishment. One is *The Cubist Poets in Paris: An Anthology*, edited by LeRoy C. Breunig.[2]

1 The title *Les Onze mille verges*—the 11,000 rods/cocks—alludes waggishly to the 11,000 Virgin Martyrs of Cologne. Indeed, a certain adolescent sauciness about Catholicism was never to forsake Apollinaire. Richardson calls the book "a masterpiece of its kind—a brilliant take-off on the Marquis de Sade that is saved from horror by irony and black humor." Picasso, to whom Apollinaire gave the manuscript, thought it the author's best work; it appeared in English in the 1960s as a sleazy paperback called *The Debauched Hospodar*.

2 *The Cubist Poets in Paris: An Anthology*, edited, translated, and with an introduction by L. C. Breunig; University of Nebraska Press, 326 pages, $35.

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Mr. Breunig, a distinguished editor and scholar of Apollinaire, includes in this anthology only three poems from *Alcools* (one of them, though, is the long introductory poem "Zone"), plus seven from *Calligrammes*. But the slimness of selection is offset by the richness of the company: we get to see what Apollinaire's pals and disciples and influences were up to poetically, people like Blaise Cendrars, Max Jacob, Pierre Reverdy, André Salmon (Apollinaire wrote a charming epithalamion in *Alcools* for him), and Laurencin herself. Of particular comparative interest are Jacob and Cendrars: Jacob's modernist spirit often falls easily into neat alexandrine couplets, while in Cendrars free verse has lost any memory of prosodic rhythm and expresses its modernist wit ("The guillotine is the masterpiece of the plastic arts") without music.

Apollinaire was, by contrast, able to work exciting changes in the traditional French lines without subsiding into subjectivist sprawl. The idea of "cubist" poetry, by the way, although deriving sanction from much chatter of the period, is fundamentally a meretricious one. "Cubist" poetry is as much an impossibility as "twelve-tone" poetry. Fun with typography is not really a parallel, for shape-poems are an old Alexandrian game and are not specifically "cubist." A case could be made for such devices as Cendrars's inclusion of a prospectus issued by the Chamber of Commerce of Denver in his travel-poem "Le Panama ou les Aventures de mes sept oncles" as cubistic, but their *weight* on the page is so much lighter than on the canvas. "Cubist" poetry is, finally, a stunt.

The whole of *Alcools* has been newly translated, with facing French but with a skimpy introduction and with no notes, by poet Donald Revell. [3] *Alcools* opens and closes with two poems, "Zone" (1913) and "Vendémiaire" (1912), that were among the last written and that offer large, apocalyptic statements. "Vendémiaire" (the Revolutionary month of vintage) strains for a Whitmanesque omnivorousness in lines like "Je suis ivre d'avoir bu tout l'univers/ . . . / Ecoutez-moi je suis le gosier de Paris/ Et je boirai encore s'il me plaît l'univers/ Ecoutez mes chants d'universelle ivrognerie." (Revell: "I am intoxicated with cosmos/ . . . / Listen to me I am the gullet of Paris/ If it pleases me I will swallow all of creation/ Listen to my songs of cosmic drunkenness.") For the moment, I want to point to the closeness of the verse here to an alexandrine base: the first line is a syllable away from being an alexandrine; the second and third are quite traditional, even to the median caesura; even the fourth can be heard as an alexandrine with an added syllable. But the Romantic egoism is, in the poem as a whole, cut with a Parisian sweetness, as in "Que Paris était beau à la fin de septembre" (Revell: "Paris was beautiful in late September") and as in the poem's three final lines, all alexandrines and the last two a couplet with feminine rhyme: "Et la nuit de septembre s'achevait lentement/ Les feux rouges des ponts s'éteignaient dans la Seine/ Les étoiles mouraient le jour naissait à peine." (Revell: "And the September night ended in no hurry/ The fiery bridges were doused in the Seine/ The constellations died and day had barely begun.")

What is Revell up to? First of all, he gives the title of this poem so soaked in wine and drinking as "The Harvest Month," as if it were called "Messidor"—a pointless change. Then in rendering the verse he loses the traditional rhythm so clearly audible in the French and offers nothing in its stead but a timid conversational swagger and a blurred rhyme or two. He has, in fact, announced an intention "to distort certain moments of syntax deliberately to reproduce Apollinaire's verbal and thematic strayings." This licensing of his own operations by reference to Apollinaire's promenades is an all-too-familiar kind of postmodern sleight-of-

3 *Alcools*, by Guillaume Apollinaire, translated and with an introduction by Donald Revell; Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 171 pages, $30; $15.95 paper.

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hand, and one is not surprised to find Revell claiming authority for it in Marjorie Perloff's notion of "strolling" indeterminacy and in the "beautiful solecisms" of John Ashbery. He sees Apollinaire as championing "aimlessness, the total surrender of language to the immediate moment," and sees himself as entitled to do the same thing.

He is wrong on both counts. In Apollinaire's best verse there is no aimlessness or total surrender but an electric tension between innovative impudence and the formal French poetry he knew and loved. And even if Revell were right about Apollinaire, he would be wrong about what a presenter of Apollinaire in English ought to do. Apollinaire needs scholarship, modesty, fidelity. He wants lovers, not apes. He gets what he deserves in the excellent edition of *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War (1913–1916)* with the facing French translated by Anne Hyde Greet, plus a full introduction and copious annotation by Greet and S. I. Lockerbie (University of California Press, 1980). In meticulously reproducing on the English side of the page the shaped calligram poems, this volume is a triumph of typography as well as of expository scholarship and linguistic tact.

"Zone," Apollinaire's signature poem, sets the poet (called variously "tu" and "je") walking through the scenes—the zones—of his life, above all, Paris. It begins in the morning, goes through the night, ends with a sunrise—not unlike "Vendémiaire." With deadpan éclat the poet praises the Pope and Christ as avatars of modernity: Christ "holds the world's altitude record. . . . And the century become a bird climbs skyward like Jesus" (Shattuck). In "Zone" Apollinaire shakes off the alexandrine and soars into the free ether. He has lots of provocative things to say about his own and modern life, but his way of saying them is less vital, less tense than earlier. The opening of "Zone" became as celebrated a *cri de coeur* and rallying cry as "Let us go then, you and I . . .": "A la fin tu es las de ce monde ancien/ Bergère ô tour Eiffel le troupeau des ponts bêle ce matin." Breunig: "In the long run you're tired of this ancient world/ Shepherdess oh Eiffel Tower the flock of bridges bleats this morning"; Revell: "At last you're tired of this elderly world/ Shepherdess O Eiffel Tower this morning the bridges are bleating"; Samuel Beckett (in a 1950 translation): "In the end you are weary of this ancient world/ This morning the bridges are bleating Eiffel Tower oh herd."

None of these too-faithful versions gets either the exhausted, uphill, monosyllabic pitch of the first line or the urban-pastoral conceit of the second. (As an example of how Apollinaire was operating deep within French tradition, I cite as lying somewhere behind that very modernist second line Du Bellay's dawn poem that begins: "Déjà la nuit en son parc amassoit/ Un grand troupeau d'étoiles vagabondes.") In the one striking departure from the French, Beckett metathesizes the vocative and it becomes an instance of ugly Beckettian bathos.

"Zone"'s last line, bidding farewell to a rising sun seen as a bleeding neck, is the unforgettable "Soleil cou coupé." Breunig: "Sun clean-cut neck"; Revell: "Sun cut throated"; Beckett: "Sun corseless head." The three bare words, which proleptically epitomize all the Surrealism that was to owe so much to Apollinaire, pack together asyndeton (unarticulated juxtaposition), pun (coucou = cuckoo), shock. Breunig's "clean-cut" is a nice attempt to give a reverse charge to an American cliché; Revell's "cut-throated" is a clever neologism but might be improved with the simpler "sun cut throat"; Beckett exaggerates the horror, but his faux-Jacobean "corseless" does shock.

The best poem of *Alcools* is the long lament called "La Chanson du mal aimé" ("The Song of the Poorly Loved"), which was written shortly after a visit to London in 1903 in search of Annie Playden. Consisting of sixty five-line ABABA stanzas of eight-syllable lines that hark back to Villon, Ronsard, and Du Bellay, the poem opens on a

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foggy London evening as the narrator, "I," follows a scruffy cupid (or devilish anti-cupid) toward his love. The frustrated quest opens onto a phantasmagoric terrain of biblical allusion, classical myth, Christian hagiography, and coded obscenity. The lovelorn poet ends up—pleasingly but perhaps not surprisingly—on a Sunday night in June wandering around his lovely Paris ("J'erre à travers mon beau Paris"). The antepenultimate stanza distills the magic of Apollinaire:

> Soirs de Paris ivres du gin
> Flambant de l'électricité
> Les tramways feux verts sur l'échine
> Musiquent au long des portées
> De rails leur folie de machines

(Much was made in 1913 of *Alcools*'s lack of punctuation—a last-minute whim of the poet's. Now passing unnoticed, it was a big deal then in French.) Roger Shattuck:

> Drunk on gin the Paris nights
> Blaze with electricity
> The trolleys flashing greenish lights
> Warble along their staves of tracks
> The madness of machinery

Revell:

> The Paris nights are blind with gin
> And blaze with electricity
> The green fires of a great machine
> Derange my city
> To the spinal music of the trains

Shattuck's homely fidelity keeps close to the original, though Apollinaire's variations in meter and rhyme (he prided himself on renovating the eight-syllable line and on revolutionizing masculine and feminine rhyme) are far more subtle and daring, as in the first line's choriamb-like swing. Shattuck makes a stab at rhyme and then lets it go. Revell starts off promisingly, the rhythms of his first two lines being stiffer than the French; then, drunk on his own assonance (nights/ blind/ fires/ spinal; blaze/ derange/ trains), he forsakes meter and sense for a blurry trippiness, an Ashbery-ian high. "Green fires of a great machine"—far out, dude!

Alas, Apollinaire, though he loved to tease with arcane and imagined allusions, was not a postmodernist; his was *not* the sound of half-overheard conversations or radio-station surfing. His was an erudite, Alexandrian wit; he was a *poète précieux* in a defined tradition. He smelled, attractively, of the perfumes of the lonely modern city—of alcohol and gasoline and the dust of the forbidden wing of the library.

Was he a great poet? It was, of course, his destiny to write in the wake of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, true founders of languages, sensibilities, poetics. Next to such figures Apollinaire seems more a Gautier or a Verlaine—indispensable but of the second rank. He was a great figure, a great modernist without being a great poet. He was a belated Byron who, though he lived slightly longer than the Englishman, was not fated to produce his *Don Juan*.

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Poems *by Barry Spacks, Cynthia Zarin & C. Dale Young*

Worrying the Muse

You used to come nightly, kick off your heels,
hum in my ear—how my atoms purred
from the way that you laugh
when you're cheating at Scrabble!

I know, our deal: no questions asked,
no fits if you lurch in from partying
with whole translation committees. Sure,
no one's about to love you tame,

but look—how abject can I get?—
the study's dusted, quiet, I've set
cornflowers on the desk, our favorite
pad and pen . . . whatever helps.

Did you just get too damn lonesome for
Tangier, or Massachusetts snow?
No, tell, tell . . .
is there someone else?

—*Barry Spacks*

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Mrs. Donleavey

"There's Mrs. Donleavey," someone said,
and pointed to where she stood in her cloud
of nightgown, twenty yards up from where

five of us waited for the school bus to stop.
Her flood of gold hair was stained with damp.
Rosebuds grew from the gauze and tar

of her body. She hummed, and the long
braid of sound came down to us, a blind snake
in the garden, and though I held back I wanted

to leap and catch it, to grapple, to hoist
myself up into what I even then knew would be
the lap of grief. It was a cool morning

in early spring. Dew polished the dragon
leaves of the laurel, the blue hydrangea,
the boxwood whose dense green scales sprang

back at my touch, from my hand that blocked
her from view when the bus pulled away
with me at the window, and my palm left a smudge

that within days came to mark like a blossom
of smoke her complete disappearance
from our street—or so I thought I'd heard,

under a rush of water and the radio—into
a past I believed was hers only and that
seemed to me then shiny, inconsolable, new.

—Cynthia Zarin

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Devon House

Kingston, Jamaica

Lamps have begun to light as evening,
alluvial, fills every crevice in the courtyard,

fills Devon House, alone with its marble columns,
its verandas and esplanades empty,

the plantation gone, and the fields,
the courtyard a tourist attraction now:

glass ashtrays etched with boys
too large to be clambering coconut trees,

statuettes of women too smooth to be burdened
with baskets of fruit on their heads, stoneware

with doctor birds captured in the shallowest *bas relief*,
key rings carved in the rough shape of the island,

and now even the hummingbirds are spoken of as jewels
where once everyone drowned in leaf-filtered sunlight.

—*C. Dale Young*

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Theater

Dwindling dramatically

by Mark Steyn

One girl is boring,
And two is obscene.
Give him hundreds
And hundreds
Of girls!

Thus Mack Sennett, in the musical *Mack and Mabel*, revealing how to make your average Joe happy at the movies. Sadly, at the show's West End première, the more Mack sings about "Hundreds and Hundreds of Girls," the more you notice that there are, in fact, precisely eleven of them, strung out across the vast Piccadilly Theatre stage so thinly that, in the gaps between, Mack could drive a truck. A number intended to celebrate the lavishness of motion pictures instead draws attention only to the stinginess of theater.

It's considered bad taste to discuss the legitimate stage in these terms. Yet the economics of theater is now its defining characteristic. Of course, movies are spectacular mainly because of slick editing, for which theater has never found an equivalent. And electronic marvels bring diminishing returns: we're blasé about breakthroughs. Thanks to computer-generated images, the late John Candy's death halfway through shooting was no obstacle to him completing his last picture; courtesy of digital remastering, Nat "King" Cole, after twenty-five years beyond the grave, recorded a duet with his daughter. But big deal. In films, TV, recordings, we're impressed by nothing; in theater, we're impressed by *anything*. We applaud a helicopter landing in *Miss Saigon*; we take it for granted in the opening titles of *M*A*S*H*. And so, by the very extravagance of our gratitude—our sympathy, our understanding that stage drama has to be approached with different expectations—we only further complicate the dramatist's task. There is nothing weirder on the professional stage than the sight of paying Americans, night after night at *Miss Saigon*, applauding the erection of a statue to Ho Chi Minh. In her wildest dreams, Jane Fonda could never have expected to see that. But it's safe to say that, whatever the audience is cheering at that point, it's at the expense of the drama. The authors, director, producer all understand that, and, ever since the first preview, they've been trying to tilt the moment back toward the dramatic intention: originally, they had the oppressed citizens of South Vietnam raise the statue into position from the ground, then they switched to just rolling it on from the wings, etc., etc. Yet still the audience cheers.

It is a familiar plaint that the spectacular staging at musicals swamps the drama. But look at the straight plays around town and another question begins to nag: is the material poverty of theater contributing inevitably to its intellectual poverty? Since the war, the American play has shriveled dramatically—in every sense. Most of the great comedies, tragedies, and melodramas of the

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first half of the century could never be produced if they were written today: cut back the sets, the author would be told; pare down the cast. So over the years the number of players dwindles into single figures until, on today's stage, two's a company, three's a crowd scene. The defining modern American play is Bernard Slade's *Same Time Next Year* (1975), in which a New Jersey businessman and a California housewife enjoy a one-night stand in a drab motel room in February 1951 and like it so much that they decide to meet in that same motel room on the same February day every year for the next quarter-century. They ought to teach that one at creative-writing schools: your producer will only give you one man, one woman, and one set; what premise can you concoct to pass off his parsimony as a conscious artistic choice? Slade's endearingly shameless solution is the *reductio ad absurdum* of contemporary dramatic constraints, for it directly addresses every audience's unspoken question: why do these people never get out of the house and meet anyone else?

For most dramatists, there is a limited number of responses. At the Lucille Lortel off-Broadway, Nicholas Wright has a better than average example of the genre in *Mrs. Klein*. The play takes place in a single night in a single room at the London home of the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein sixty years ago. In the course of the evening, Mrs. Klein, her daughter (and fellow analyst), and her girl Friday (and fellow Mitteleuropean émigrée) grapple with the recent death of her son Hans, apparently in a climbing accident on the Continent. Thanks to Uta Hagen and her two superb supporting players, *Mrs. Klein* has an almost suffocating intensity. Yet, because of its form, it feels like a fragment of a great story. The play has a healthy skepticism about psychoanalysis, but in the end is just as pat, just as neat about human relationships: a one-set three-hander simply doesn't allow for any of life's loose ends, its ambiguities and ambivalences. They're three fascinating women but they're subordinate to the schematics.

Show business, according to Irving Berlin, is "ev'rything the traffic will allow." Actually, it's ev'rything the economics will allow, which these days is, at best, plays like *Mrs. Klein*—brief glimpses of the big picture. At first glance, *Northeast Local*, at Lincoln Center, seems like more of the same: big burly blue-collar Mickey meets raven-haired Gi in Pennsylvania in the early Sixties, and then the play drops in on them every few years for the next three decades, the passage of time indicated by bursts of "Since I Fell for You" in various versions from Ella Fitzgerald to Michael Bolton. "It seems to me I've heard that song before," you sigh, recognizing an offhand approximation of the Bernard Slade model. Vague visions of the theatrical future hover menacingly. What's left? A two-handed play about two actors who meet up once a year for thirty years to give a semi-staged reading of a different A. R. Gurney two-hander?

But then it emerges that the author, Tom Donaghy, has bigger fish to fry. He has, as it happens, a cast of four, which, in today's straitened circumstances, is enough to invite an epic of *Birth of a Nation* proportions. Donaghy seems to be attempting nothing less than the story of America across these tumultuous times. This is a quartet of insignificant people, yet every complex issue of the age seems to come coursing through their little lives. I'm not sure what the literary term is for such a severe act of compression: it's not exactly "internalization of the landscape"; downsizing of the landscape, maybe. Mickey (Anthony LaPaglia) is a welder, so he quickly loses his job and takes to the bottle. Gi (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) has ambitions above her station: "I'm real good at stuff like communicating," she says. She's wont to steam her own vegetables instead of just getting them out of a tin like Mickey's mother (Eileen Heckart) does. Oh, and Mickey's Irish-American while Gi is Italian-American, so that only leaves their friend Jesse (Terry Alexander), who's African-American. The guy in front of me, in an intriguing stage whisper, told his wife he'd seen this play

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thirty years ago, when it was by Paddy Chayefsky.

Hmm. If it ever was, it isn't now. This is a join-the-dots version of Chayefsky. Donaghy parcels out attitudes to his characters: the mother is working-class defiance; the son is blue-collar resignation; the wife is women's rights; the Negro is Negro rights. That's quite enough for a four-hander, but, as time marches on, it occurs to Donaghy that he's used up his cast and he hasn't yet got around to gay rights. So Mickey and Gi have a boy, whom we never see, but he turns out to be a Gay-American and, in the early Nineties, he undergoes a marriage of Green Card convenience to a young Japanese woman, and then inevitably, begins to lose weight alarmingly. That's an awful lot to load on to the shoulders of an unseen character. You're reminded of those actors in soap operas who get into contractual disputes and, as the weeks go by and the agents and producers square off against each other, the reasons for their absence grow ever more desperate: oh, Bill's upstairs with a broken leg/ yes, his leg got better but he married the nurse and they're honeymooning in the Virgin Islands/ yes, he's back from his honeymoon but he got gunned down at the 7-Eleven. The only difference is that, in Donaghy's play, the character has never been written *in*. Otherwise, it's much the same: at Thanksgiving, Gi sets his place at the table but he never turns up for dinner; she shouts up the stairs to him but all you can hear is loud rock music coming from his bedroom . . . For the Japanese wedding scene, Mickey and Gi stand on stage next to a futon and some bits of rice paper and peer down one of the auditorium's many aisles to the open Exit doors, beyond which the wedding is taking place. "Do you think he's looking a bit thin?" murmurs Gi, who, like so many devoted mothers, has chosen to watch her son's wedding from an adjoining room. Is there anything *too* silly for the contemporary stage? By this point in the play, with time on my hands, I was beginning to speculate idly as to whether the eternally offstage kid was a metaphor for America: he's shrunken and enfeebled, he's sold out to the Japs, and maybe he doesn't exist at all.

Whatever. The best thing about the production are Jane Greenwood's costumes, which pinpoint each stop on history's road map with wonderful precision. But, just as the actors are hustled in and out of Miss Greenwood's clothes, so Donaghy just projects onto them whatever happen to be the headlines of the hour. Everything is heavily underlined and telegraphed well in advance: for his tenth birthday, the son asks for a Talking Tina doll; even that rock record blaring from his bedroom is by . . . Queen. Honestly. As Gi, Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio does a pretty good impression of a Talking Tina doll herself. For open-minded, read simple-minded: "Everything's changing," she marvels, "the whole world's changing," and she's happy to try and keep up.

In the Playbill, Donaghy has included a quote from Gertrude Stein: "It is something strictly American to conceive a space that is so filled with moving." In directing the play, Gerald Gutierrez, who did such a fine job on *The Heiress*, seems to have taken this rather literally. The Mitzi E. Newhouse is a theater in the round, and the scenery slides on and off along the various aisles, like feeder ramps onto a radial highway. I wouldn't have thought a play like this required Gutierrez to conceive a space that's *so* filled with moving, but the traffic never lets up: a brief scene and the bed slides off and a sofa slides on, and then a kitchen island and a dining-room table groaning under an ornate centerpiece and a plastic turkey, and then a staircase, and the futon . . . Occasionally, the audience applauds, not because they put a futon in the same league as *Miss Saigon*'s chopper, but simply because it all takes so long. And, while the space is filled with moving and (to amend Shakespeare) the aisle is full of noises, and the specially commissioned music jingle-jangles around you, you have all the time in the world to notice odd little details, like the way the kitchen stools and dining chairs have legs which float six inches off the

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ground so they can glide in and out, and the huge array of lamp shades hanging over the stage like a Kmart lighting department, from whose ranks the shades of Thanksgivings past descend like bargain-basement versions of the chandelier in *Phantom of the Opera*. As in a bad musical, the set seems to be playing out some other drama entirely. The gliding banquette from the diner, the dancing lamp shades, the incidental music don't emphasize the passage of time but rather bring the play to a dead halt every ten minutes. Instead of the years unfolding, time stands still. During one longueur, I found myself recalling a whimsical stage direction of Ring Lardner's: "To indicate the passage of two weeks, the curtain is lowered for two weeks."

The American theater could use a guy like Lardner nowadays. It's not just that his ear for the vernacular is so finely attuned, but that he understood how to let inarticulate people reveal themselves, rather than explain themselves; he's especially strong on characters who can't help acting selfishly, despite their best intentions. The contemporary stage runs scared of anything that raw. Anthony LaPaglia's performance in *Northeast Local* gives his bits of it, at any rate, a gritty, working-class authenticity. But there's nothing gritty or working-class or authentic in the writing. Gi's right: the world *has* changed since the early Sixties, especially for the working class, whose assumptions on jobs and gender and race and sexuality have been demolished one by one. But everyone in this play is too nice to get stirred up over anything. Dead-end marriage followed by divorce? Hey, we still get along. The wife's moved in with some colored guy? Well, that's the breaks. The kid's a faggot? Relax, open another Bud. Truth isn't necessarily stranger than fiction, but it's certainly more dramatic. This is an easy-listening elevator ride through history.

Things are more robust at the Manhattan Theatre Club, where, in Richard Nelson's *New England*, the *dramatis personae* spend the evening lying, sneering, and abusing one another. That's because they're Brits, and, in these ever more sensitive times, the British are now the one people it's acceptable to be racist about. Or, rather, the *English* are: in American movies, the Scots and Irish have staked their own claim on victim status, and no doubt the turn of the Welsh will come one day soon. But the English! They don't march down Fifth Avenue in national dress, you never meet anyone who styles himself an English-American, there are no community spokespersons calling for more positive role models for the English community. As a Canadian, I'm occasionally minded to leap to the defense of my Commonwealth cousins, or anyway stroll to it. Even in this journal, on the very last page last month, Richard Tillinghast took a passing shot at "Britain's studied, Malthusian indifference" to the Irish potato famine. Not so. From Queen Victoria down, the British establishment responded with personal generosity and a pretty respectable attempt at what we'd now call "disaster relief." But the received myths sing better, don't they? Mr. Tillinghast then moved on to the recent release of a British soldier convicted of murdering a teenaged girl in Belfast. I've no strong views on this one way or the other, but I permitted myself an indignant snort at having to take this sort of criticism from a country where, until the gun kooks kicked up a fuss, the mainstream press was cheerfully indifferent to the way the ATF and other federal agents can go around killing women and children with impunity.

Ah, but who'd go to bat for the English? In a world of increasingly surreal euphemisms, where we have to bend over backward to say approving things about the Million Man March, we should be grateful that there's one societal sub-group we can still be rude about. *New England* is set in Connecticut, but all the characters are English except one, and she's French. The house belongs to a middle-aged academic, whose girlfriend (in publishing) has invited her ex-brother-in-law (a dialect coach) for the weekend. As he arrives, his host kills

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himself, which is what used to be called in England bad form but which sets the tone for the evening. As the weekend proceeds, the deceased's brother and children—all English exiles in the New World—arrive to mourn their loved one. That takes about a minute and a half, which leaves plenty of time to needle one another, shag the grieving girlfriend, and make snobbish cracks about the crassness of Yanks. "What shall it be?" asks Alfred, raiding the wine cellar. "Red, white or . . ." He savors the Americanism. ". . . *blush*? Hee-hee-hee."

"*Dramma*," sniffs Tom the dialect coach, gleefully mimicking the accent. "*Dramma*. That's my favorite American word."

Gemma, engaged to an illiterate Hispanic who works for her gardener, lives in New Mexico but pretends it's Africa or India because "it makes me feel better." That's an astute observation on Richard Nelson's part: for many Britons, working in America is the latter-day equivalent of a spell in the colonies, though without quite the same satisfaction.

No one is successful. These are the spongers and mediocrities, the foot soldiers straggling at the end of the long column stretching behind the trailblazing glamourpusses like Tina Brown. Alfred teaches English at one of those colleges where the students tell you Keats is shit and you have to put up with it because at the end of the semester the kids grade the teachers; Tom is fed up with silly actresses who want to play Othello. "Othello is a black man. Or is it African-American? Who gives a fuck?"

I would have thought there were two fairly easy ways to relish this play. If you're British, you laugh at the jokes about the Americans. If you're American, you laugh at the pathetic smugness of the Brits. As a Canadian, I like to think there was a little bit of both in my chortles. But I suddenly became aware, on the Othello line, that I was the only one laughing at all. Everyone else at the Manhattan Theatre Club seemed either bewildered or discomforted; two or three tittered nervously; most couldn't quite believe what they'd just heard. Certainly, the line is one you'd never find in *Northeast Local*, even though those unemployed Pennsylvania welders and the preening, effete Brits aren't so very different: both have spent the last thirty years adjusting to cultural displacement. In its exquisite contempt, Nelson's line rings true: enfeebled and moth-eaten as they are, the English abroad are still self-confident enough not to see themselves as an ethnic minority. Besides, there is a frightening plausibility in the idea of Othello being described as an African-American. I remember a network TV reporter covering Nelson Mandela's visit to Washington and describing him as "the African-American . . ." Somewhere around the hyphen, her brain must have realized that, as African-Americans go, Mr. Mandela is heavy on the African, light on the American. So she attempted to retrieve the situation, and wound up labeling him as "the African-American, er, African." Americans are often bemused by the stratifications of the British class system—whether the second son of a duke takes precedence over the widow of a baronet, etc. But political correctness is giving America its own equally elaborate apparatus of genteel, deferential circumlocution.

Northeast Local is a Clintonian play: it draws the subject to its lips but it doesn't inhale. *New England* does: it inhales deeply, and then blows exhibitionist smoke rings all over the audience. None of the characters cares whether he or she's liked or not. Once in a while, in the same way that a stopped clock can't help telling the correct time twice a day, one or another of them seems *almost* likable, but it's never for very long. And, just as the Americans are shown no mercy by the withering English, they in turn are shown no mercy by Richard Nelson. However much they despise the vulgar Yanks, they despise themselves far more. The finale—a coarse, rugby-club rendition of "The British Grenadiers"—is staged with vicious cruelty by Tudor Davies. It would be invidious to single out any individuals in this bravura cast, but it

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should be said that they're all American.

So, too, is Nelson, though he's had more success in London. *New England* was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and is a kind of companion piece to *Some Americans Abroad*, his in-jokey portrait of a U.S. theater tour, complete with scenes set in the RSC cafeteria. He mined similar territory in *Two Shakespearean Actors*, based on the rivalry between Edwin Forrest (U.S.) and William Macready (U.K.) culminating in the Astor Place riots when twenty-two New Yorkers were killed in a dispute over which man made the better Macbeth. Those were the days, eh? Caught up in two standing ovations this month—one at *Hello, Dolly!* (at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre), one at *Victor/Victoria* (at the Marquis), neither of which I was keen to participate in—I found myself fantasizing about an Astor Place rematch between Julie Andrews fans and Carol Channing groupies.

Of the two, I'd back Channing. I don't think I've ever experienced a more joyless ovation than at *Victor/Victoria*. It's economics again. When you've paid seventy-five bucks for an ineptly staged retread of an indifferent movie, you're entitled at least to go through the ritual of ovation. All you need to know about the plot is that it takes place in Paris in the Thirties and Miss Andrews plays a girl pretending to be a boy pretending to be a girl. It's supposed to be a star vehicle for her return to Broadway, but it comes over as if she's only doing it as a favor to her husband, the librettist/director/producer Blake Edwards. The finale is meant to be a plea for sexual tolerance, but, in context, it sounds more like a plea of guilty but with mitigating circumstances:

> We're all meant to cherish one another.
> It's not a crime to love each other.

True. But Julie's loyalty to her husband is not reciprocated. Hers was the greater legend: *The Boyfriend*, *My Fair Lady*, *Camelot*, and then, with an unblemished record, she departed for Hollywood and in so doing, Alan Jay Lerner once told me, changed the course of theater history. Even if you don't buy that, who's Blake Edwards to put a blot like this on her escutcheon? A star can't shine without book or songs or direction in a show that has no reason to be, other than its director's ego. Greater nerve hath no man than to lay down his wife for his con trick.

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The media

The very prime of prime time?

by James Bowman

When I was a teacher, a pupil told me (as pupils will) a story about an incident in the classroom of one of my colleagues. I could never bear to ask the colleague about it, not only because it might look as if I was listening to tale-bearers but also for fear that the story might prove to be untrue. It was too good to check, as we journalists say.

This particular teacher was a great favorite with the late adolescents whom he taught. Though he was never merely slavishly trendy, he knew something about popular culture; though he never attempted to curry favor by pretending to be a teenager himself, he believed in that culture's importance. Like many members of his generation, which was just too old to have experienced the liberation of the Sixties (I believe he got married in 1963, poor bugger), he indulged his regrets by cultivating a passionate belief in the intellectual seriousness of his obstreperous juniors.

One day as he was teaching his honors English class for the brightest boys and girls, he embarked on a pop-cultural *tour d'horizon* which prominently featured the role of the Beatles in having shaken up and changed forever the vapid and mindless sentimentality which had characterized popular taste before them. My informant would not swear to it, but he may even have mentioned the opinion of that most tuned-in of musicologists, Wilfred Mellers, that Lennon and McCartney were the greatest songsmiths since Schubert.

Moreover, he insisted, the Fab Four represented not only an aesthetic advance but a social one, for they were representative of that lucky postwar generation in Britain, between Beveridge and Shirley Williams, which had benefited from the new, high-powered state grammar schools. Out of these genius factories for the hitherto neglected, these Etons for the talented working classes which had put the old Eton in the shade, had come intellectual and artistic products of the first order. At last Britain had freed herself from her stultifying class-structure and released the pent-up brain power of the masses in a popular culture of genuine depth and seriousness.

As he grew more and more eloquent in painting his verbal picture of that intellectual Golden Age of which his pupils were the beneficiaries, a voice was heard from the back row, reciting in measured and uninflected tones:

She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah,
She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah,
She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah, YEAH!

It was a moment to treasure. I'm not sure that my colleague was ever quite the same after it. But there are a few of those still commenting on popular culture whose opinions have obviously not had the benefit of such bracing schoolboy irreverence. One should not mind too much about such things as "The Beatles Anthology," which

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was broadcast on ABC in November. The full-page ad for the CD in *The New York Times* called it "The Most Important Event in Modern Musical History." Such hyperbole may even make sense in the terms set out by the BBC's documentary history of rock 'n' roll, which came to us by way of public television in September. That television should treat pop music with the sort of seriousness once reserved for high culture is only appropriate. What is disturbing is literary folk who take television itself seriously.

A particularly egregious example is Charles McGrath, the new editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, whose piece "The Triumph of the Prime-Time Novel" appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* of October 22. McGrath says plainly that he believes that "TV is actually enjoying a sort of golden age" which is worthy of notice by "card-carrying intellectuals"—a formulation which, I think, is particularly interesting and revealing. For the C-CI, he says, are those who "keep a little cable-ready Sony wedged up there in the bookcase, next to Rilke and Heidegger," and constitute, it appears, a very exclusive club. You have to read (or at least pretend to read) famously difficult poets and philosophers in order to gain this social cachet, but once you've got it, along with a bookcase containing lots of brain-bending stuff, then you can watch TV with a clear conscience.

And, of course, it is McGrath's purpose to clear your conscience further. Once you have earned that "card" and with it the honor of being called an intellectual, you can begin to notice what intellectual stuff there is on TV. Not, of course, those Klassic Komics versions of Dickens and George Eliot that we see on "Masterpiece Theatre." He rightly dismisses the recent adaptations of *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Middlemarch* for their one-dimensional characters and missing elements of plot and thematic material. No, he says, "the TV shows I have in mind are the weekly network dramatic series. These shows are flourishing in a way that they haven't since the very early days of the medium, and have grown in depth and sophistication into what might be thought of as a brand-new genre: call it the prime-time novel."

Actually, this makes sense when we remember what the non-prime-time novel—that is, the old-fashioned ink-and-paper kind—has become in the late twentieth century. Apart from a few old-fashioned practitioners, novelists generally do seem these days as if they would prefer to be writing TV scripts, so trivial and superficial and detached from reality are their novels. My guess is that Mr. McGrath, who used to be fiction editor of *The New Yorker*, is to be pitied for having had to spend so much of his life with contemporary fiction that he has forgotten what really good novels are like. In praising the TV novels, for instance, he cites as examples of their worthiness of "intellectual" attention the fact that they deal with topical subjects, and that you can learn a lot of legal or medical jargon from them.

This is not to say that he hasn't got a point. On the contrary, he makes an excellent case for seeing television, for all the overt quality of its commercial sponsorship, as less corrupted by money than either films or theater, and therefore more willing to take artistic risks. The result is that television has "become much more of a writer's medium than either movies or Broadway, which are more and more preoccupied with delivering spectacle of one kind or another." By "a writer's medium" he means not only that writers retain more creative control in TV than they do in the movies but also that television is the ideal medium for dialogue, which is the pre-eminently writerly contribution to the televisual *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

A book is better, says McGrath, because of "suggestiveness, the invitation to something deeper," but

> on television these days, if you listen hard enough, you can often hear dialogue of writerly quality—dialogue, that is, that's good enough to be in a book. And there are ways in

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> which TV has actually taken over some of the roles that books used to fill. A few of the more inventive TV series, for example, have become for our era the equivalent of the serial novel, unfolding epic stories installment by installment, and sweeping all of us up in shared anxiety and in a lot of group sighing and head shaking over what fate or (it's the same thing) the author has in store.

Here, I think, we come back to the curious business of the intellectuals' club. We of the card-carrying intellectual type, who have Rilke and Heidegger on our shelves next to the Sony, know that Dickens and Thackeray were first published in serial form. Dickens and Thackeray are certified conferrers of the intellectual cachet, and therefore (it does not take too much of a stretch) anything which, like them, reaches us in serial form derives from them its right to the intellectual cachet. Q.E.D.

It doesn't matter that most of the stuff published in serial form, then as now, is utter rubbish. We intellectuals have a dim recollection of the social reaction to the story of Little Nell, and there is a superficial pleasure to be derived from comparing it to the office discussing "E.R." around the water cooler. Or, to put it in terms comprehensible to his fellow card-carrying intellectuals, McGrath says that "the show uses time the way serial novels used to, incorporating the intervals between installments, and the tension between what we've learned and what we fear or hope, into the experience of the story itself." And, as if this were not Dickensian enough, we find that in "N.Y.P.D. Blue," as in Dickens, the art is "to play characters who change against those who cannot" and to teach us that "it is in the nature of adversity to turn most of us into caricatures."

Let me be the first to admit that I have, very probably, not watched so much television (or read so much Heidegger, I daresay) as Mr. McGrath, but caricatures seem to me to be the one thing you *never* see on television. Types, yes. Stereotypes, certainly. But a genuinely Dickensian grotesque could never survive in that airless medium of the air, which reduces everything to blandness. McGrath himself seems to half-recognize this when he cites among the other literary and artistic forebears of the prime-time novel "the tradition of classic American realism, the realism of Dreiser and Hopper: the painstaking, almost literal examination of middle- and working-class lives in the conviction that truth resides less in ideas than in details closely observed. More than many novels, TV tells us how we live now."

How to reconcile this belief in "painstaking realism" (which seems to me not a very helpful characterization of Dreiser or Hopper, though these are good names to drop in order to keep the card-carrying intellectuals on board) with the ever-present magic of Dickens's world? Does he suppose that what has kept Dickens alive posthumously is his faithful chronicling of the way the Victorians lived then? If so, we are not encouraged to think very highly of his critical faculties when they are applied to television either.

But, like so many critics, McGrath is a sucker for technique. Show him how the trick works (or, better still, let him figure it out for himself) and he is full of admiration for the ingenuity and artistic quality of the trickster. The techniques are standard TV fare now, deriving, he tells us, from the revolutionary "Hill Street Blues" of 1981—though perhaps, in its use of multiple stories at once, they ultimately derive from Elmer Rice's play *Street Scene* of 1929. And, although the writing owes a lot to Elmore Leonard and George V. Higgins, the more important influences are such pioneering TV dramas as "Naked City" or "Ben Casey"—shows "whose tricks the latest crop of writers have borrowed and whose formulas they've enriched and complicated" by combining, for example, "doc show plus soap opera" in "E.R." or "cops-and-robbers plus midlife-crisis comedy" in "N.Y.P.D. Blue." "What's surprising," he writes,

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> is that by operating within the ancient conventions, and sometimes right at the very edges of them, these shows often manage a considerable degree of originality. And they frequently attain a kind of truthfulness, or social seriousness, that movies, in particular, seem to be shying away from these days. A TV executive I know is fond of pointing out that an issue-oriented film like *Silkwood* or *Norma Rae* could not be made today, that nobody would finance such a project.

Here at last the card-carrying intellectual tips his hand, revealing that, for him, "truthfulness" and "social seriousness" are one and the same thing. But writing about the fashionable "issues" of the moment seems to me to be just the opposite of seriousness. It smothers the genuine artistic impulse toward the universal in favor of a merely journalistic desire to be up-to-date and socially relevant. Nor is it clear how far, if at all, "truthfulness" is to be distinguished from authenticity. "N.Y.P.D. Blue," for example,

> is filmed almost entirely in Hollywood, but by using some well-chosen New York City exteriors and just a few station-house sets—a poorly lighted stairwell, a squad room, a room where suspects are interviewed and a dingy men's room (where many of the most intimate and revealing scenes take place)—the show has managed to evoke the authentic look and feel of New York and its police force.

To be sure, there are few more intimate and revealing places than a men's room. But what McGrath really admires is characters who have the wit to reveal what he already knows and so to put the seal on their own authenticity. He cites, for example, Dennis Franz's "masterly portrayal" of Detective Andy Sipowicz in "N.Y.P.D. Blue." Franz has played so many cops in his career (twenty-seven by his own count) that the acting is second nature to him.

> Effortlessness, or the appearance of effortlessness, is actually a hallmark of the best TV acting, as opposed to movie acting, in which so often we're meant to see (or, at any rate, are never allowed to forget) the personality of the actor underneath the role . . . Franz *is* Sipowicz, and the difference is that TV allows him to inhabit the role in ways that the big screen would not—in dozens and dozens of small moments.

It is really the intimacy of these small moments which makes McGrath happy with his television. Like any watcher of soap operas, he finds it comforting and reassuring to be allowed to share in the ostensibly private lives of policemen or doctors. He never tires of the shows which afford him, as he imagines, a peep behind the curtain at those who act on such a public stage. Their familiarity makes them more real to him, while sharing in the communal experience of watching them plugs him into reality in another way:

> Watching television is in many ways a private, solitary activity—almost like reading. But watching television is also what we do as a nation; millions and millions of us tune in together, like Homer and Marge, at the same time, to the same shows. Television is something, maybe the only thing, that all of us have in common. In my own case, I was never so grateful for TV as when, during a period in my life not long ago, I was working at a job that required me to spend 12 or 14 hours a day reading, or else talking to people about what they had written. By the time I got home, cranky and bleary-eyed, my wife and children were often asleep, but my faithful companion in the den never failed to brighten at my arrival. It gave me the news and the scores, sang all the new songs to me and generally kept me abreast of all the life I was missing. Most of all it told me stories. When I went back to work the next day I had something to talk about—how Andy was doing, whether Doc Greene and his wife would get back together—and I felt connected.

One feels embarrassed, rather as one might upon being told by a friend of his love affair

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with a tart. McGrath is so obviously looking for our approval because of his depth of feeling, in spite of the unworthiness of its object.

But his idea is abroad. Bruce Handy in *Time* has also written that, "heretical as it may sound, the 1990s are TV's real Golden Age." Bruce Fretts appears with the same message in *Entertainment Weekly* with a Top-Ten List of the reasons why TV is better than the movies, some of which—such as Number 2, that "We care more about TV characters," or Number 4, that "In TV, the writer rules"—overlap with McGrath's points in comparing the two. Also like McGrath, he has some curious criteria for ostensibly aesthetic judgments. Number 1, for instance, tells us that "Women thrive on TV" and therefore get to see more positive images of themselves than they do in the movies. Likewise, Number 5 is that "TV is more fun to talk about," Number 6 that "TV deals with 'Mature Themes' more maturely," and Number 7 that "TV is more convenient."

All these pluses suggest a social function which outweighs an aesthetic one, even though Fretts takes it as given that "N.Y.P.D. Blue" is a show which takes "an in-depth look at the human condition." Ah yes. Depth. Like McGrath too, Fretts assumes that dramas which deal with topical "issues" are inherently of a higher quality than those that don't. Even though there is less money involved than in feature films, says Fretts, "HBO has attracted stars like Sissy Spacek and Richard Gere for films dealing with such hot-button topics as abortion (*A Private Matter*) and AIDS (*And the Band Played On*)" because there is less pressure on them to carry the box office. It seems not really a relevant consideration in this context to mention that such dramas are almost invariably the crudest sort of propaganda. At least they are topical and "controversial," as movies rarely are.

Tom Shales in *The Washington Post* took up his pen to debunk the more elaborate claims of Handy, McGrath, and Fretts, but only by taking issue with their having overstated their case:

> The notion that nearly half a century after it arrived on the American scene, network television has reached some kind of glorious apotheosis is a provocative one, but balderdash. The existence of a handful of first-rate dramas such as "E.R." and "N.Y.P.D. Blue" and of such sophisticated sitcoms as "Seinfeld" and "Frasier" does not constitute a renaissance.

Well, no, but I would like to hear some defense of the idea that these four shows are in fact first-rate in any sense which doesn't involve comparison merely to other crummy TV shows, than which they are just marginally less crummy. Granted that they can hardly be said to add up to a Golden Age, as the starry-eyed McGrath allows himself to believe: do they even add up to a Brass Age? According to Shales, "When TV is really good, it's as good as anything served up on a silver screen or under a proscenium arch, and deserving of as much respect." But, he objects to the criers-up of the new shows, "that's been true for years. Indeed decades."

This is reassuring to me. For every now and then I form the resolution of sitting down for a week or so and watching as much television as I can stand, just to test again my instinctive belief in the importance of the distinction between soap opera and grand opera. If the gold standard of comparison is still, as it is for Shales, the television of the 1950s, I need not bother. Still, and in spite of the unconvincing arguments of television's advocates, one can hardly escape the nagging sense that in all that acreage of programming there may indeed be some high art at least as worthy of comparison with Dickens and Shakespeare as the Beatles are with Schubert. I really should make an effort at least once a year to check it out. Perhaps I shall get round to it next month.

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Dance

The legacy of Mr. B

by Laura Jacobs

He'd say, "Let's all go to the theater and have a class. . . ." That was Balanchine's idea of a perfect schedule. He loved to teach dancers. He loved dancing, and he wanted it to be so wonderful; how you get it to be wonderful is to train people to do it.

—Diana Adams, in *I Remember Balanchine*

In the 604 pages of *I Remember Balanchine*, Francis Mason's interviews with eighty-five people close to the late ballet master of the New York City Ballet, hardly a page goes by without a reference to Balanchine the teacher.[1] Questions of who he taught, what he taught, when, where, and why he taught are answered in tones of relish, reverence, and even resentment, but the picture is always consistent. Or, as one dancer said, "persistent . . . He just started from the beginning every time." True, the classroom was a laboratory, an atmosphere of intense competition. But it was also a playpen, the crucible of esprit de corps. Of all the lines in the book attributed to Mr. B, the one Diana Adams quotes tells most. With its show-in-a-barn enthusiasm, gotta-dance devotion, simplicity, it's a line you could love, and for me it reveals the man—his dependence on the group ("let's all go") as well as his implicit leadership ("and have a class"). Company class was George's idea of a good time.

"Someday I'll be known more for my teaching than for my choreography," Balanchine told his third wife, Maria Tallchief. It's hard to imagine exactly what he meant by that. The teaching and the choreography are inseparable halves of a whole—his art. Which is why Balanchine's classroom was so important, and so philosophically and politically charged. Dancers who didn't show up for his class, who studied elsewhere for whatever reason, missed out on the master's day-to-day dialogue with the art form and, risking his indifference, risked roles. Those weren't just new ballets on stage, they were the subject of the moment, be it Balanchine's fascination with Suzanne Farrell's otherworldly aplomb (*Diamonds*), or Merrill Ashley's bravura pointe work (*Ballo Della Regina*), or, say, the formal tattoos of Scotland, so gravely weighed in *Union Jack*. They were lessons in what Balanchine was learning—from his dancers and from life.

That Balanchine's choreography is teacherly was not lost on dancers or on fans. Tallchief tells of how the Mozart ballet *Symphonie Concertante* was actually an excruciating, if exquisite, exercise, Balanchine's attempt to get his dancers to finish their fifth positions with precision, to *get there*, as dancers say. The audience, of course, was learning to get there too. Almost from the start the New York City Ballet has known the passionate involvement of intellectuals and dreamers of every stripe, and has been attended by a distinguished

1 *I Remember Balanchine: Recollections of the Ballet Master by Those Who Knew Him Best*, by Francis Mason; Doubleday, 604 pages, $25.

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history of criticism, beginning with the work of its co-founder, Lincoln Kirstein. Balanchine's idea—let's all go—was the basis of a community that included anyone with open eyes and heart.

A community without teachers is no community, so it isn't surprising that the first important Balanchine book to be published since his death in 1983 has been written by a teacher. *Following Balanchine* is a collection and expansion of the essays Robert Garis first published in journals and magazines, among them *Ballet Review* and *Raritan*.[2] A professor of English emeritus at Wellesley College, Garis has been following Balanchine since 1945, when he was twenty. His book offers an intimate journey—the study of oneself and one's beliefs nestled inside the study of an artist—and it is a tightrope walk over a net of narcissism. But the risk is worth taking, for if there is one point to remember about Balanchine's enterprise—Garis's encompassing, ongoing word for the classes, the company, the choreography—it is the countless *identifications* it required of the audience: the recognition of dancers' faces and physiques, the reading of enigmatic steps and gestures, the repeated seeing that led to poetic empathy, each dance the flower of many destinies. Balanchine mattered personally to his followers, people who made the inner space of his theater part of their inner life.

Concretely, analytically, stubbornly, and imaginatively, Garis follows Balanchine, speculating on the master's motives for dropping ballets, favoring certain ballerinas, editing masterpieces, making detours from what seemed to be sure paths. He is brilliant on the subject of the evolving collaboration between Stravinsky and Balanchine, compelling in his discussion of Balanchine's choreo-musical structures. Garis labors in putting forward Violette Verdy, a special favorite, yet is memorably fretful and fair-minded in his view of the Farrell–Balanchine six-year estrangement ("I saw everyone's side. I felt shame for everyone—for Balanchine's jealousy and lack of self-control, for Farrell's overestimation of her power, for Mejia's insignificance as the bone of contention"). One thing Garis's pursuit is not, however, is solitary.

Following Balanchine presents and depends upon a network of relationships that are symmetrical and ascending—and utterly representative of the Balanchine enterprise. The recurring dynamic is that of the teacher-student, and we see it first in Garis's relation to his father, and later, more profoundly, in his long friendship with the influential critic B. H. Haggin, an authoritarian scorekeeper of art's better and best, a self-appointed patriarch to younger critics. It is clear that the push and pull of this relationship, the respect expected by the elder and the inevitable independence of the younger, leads Garis to a sharper hearing of discontented pitches between Balanchine and Stravinsky. As the book and Garis gather strength, and the youngers grow up to the elders, Garis looks solely to Balanchine for both questions and answers. We see social connections transmute into a spiritual one.

Garis shows us how this happens, and it helps to explain why the New York City Ballet and its problems of leadership since Balanchine's death are so personalized, so public, so to the heart of art in our lifetime. Sure you could say that Balanchine serves as a kind of Freudian father figure for a sky-scanning sector of society, each follower claiming to understand him best, but that's reductive. Balanchine and the New York City Ballet were a community founded on ideals of discipline, competition, beauty, culture. An ethic of inspired expression held audience and company together, a more powerful and life-affirming value than likeness based on genetic codes, on skin or sex. For those who like to look at Balanchinians as escapists, well true, they do escape—into a continuum that stretches between good feet and faith, sweat and light.

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2 *Following Balanchine*, by Robert Garis; Yale University Press, 260 pages, $30.

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Furthest into the faith and light stands Suzanne Farrell, who upon hearing Balanchine say "Suzanne doesn't sweat," never again did. Farrell is a monumental figure in the Balanchine enterprise, the dancer Balanchine had been working toward all his life and whom he dwelled on during his last twenty years—an obsession that became a collaboration. She receives the longest chapter in Garis's book, and dominates as well the recently released first installment of videotapes from the George Balanchine Trust. Part of a series called "The Balanchine Library," this effort too is implicitly pedagogic, a preserve in which we see the ballets as they looked with Mr. B in the wings.[3] The series includes tapes of class-like demonstrations that focus on how Balanchine wanted key steps performed, and also a copy of the documentary *Dancing for Mr. B: Six Balanchine Ballerinas*, which does not include Farrell, except in sighs and stoic mention. She's a presence made phenomenal by absence.

The tapes are wonderful to have alongside Garis's book, especially *Dancing for Mr. B*. Each ballerina is queenly in her domain—her repertory—but each in her turn must give way to a younger queen, releasing Balanchine into new country. The attentive eye will see, in the clips of Tanaquil Le Clercq and Allegra Kent after her, premonitions of Farrell. As the critic David Daniel said to me, "Farrell already existed, by inference," in Le Clercq's crane legs, delicate yet fantastically decisive, in Kent's luminous forehead and impressionable classicism. Add to that the elemental force of Farrell's strength, her oneness with risk, and you have a dancer of whom Balanchine could ask anything. He had always wanted total animal attention from his ballerinas, from big toe to tiara; with Farrell he got heat lightning, an Olympian daring that flooded the stage with sensation.

It was shocking when Farrell was fired from the New York City Ballet two years ago—a third daughter herself, her banishment felt like Cinderella's or Cordelia's. These days, though, that's the way many corporations are run—get rid of the old guard, get rid of the teachers. There are those who are happy with the way Balanchine is being danced at the New York City Ballet, who in the name of moving on would rather not question the current laws of natural selection. But it takes only fifteen minutes with the Library tape of *Divertimento No. 15* to see the jaw-dropping difference between yesterday and today. When the company danced the Mozart ballet last spring, it was a race, machine-tooled, as if someone's life depended on flat-out attack. Indeed, among the younger dancers, attack is the prevailing energy at NYCB (and a sad subtext ever since ballet master-in-chief Peter Martins made the papers for hitting his ballerina wife). One saw the coarsening most symbolically in the company's steeply squeezed version of *The Sleeping Beauty*, where the fairy variations, that normally nuanced suite of endowments, were danced at tempos of unseemly push and speed. Fairy riffs, no gifts.

When I finally sat down to the tape of *Divertimento No. 15*, it was with increasing astonishment that I watched this big, buttery confection, an odd, contradictory mix of stateliness and air, of butterfly poise and serene muscularity. It was taut yet paced—not at all fast or thin or Zeitgeisty—and I was reminded of a friend's observation that NYCB tempos are now revved up beyond recall in an attempt to spark phrases dancers don't know how to fill with pure physical charisma.

When the announcement came that, for one week this fall, Farrell would stage seven Balanchine ballets at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.,[4] it caused a considerable

3 The first five video cassettes in "The Balanchine Library" are currently available from Nonesuch Dance Collection ($29.98 each); an additional five cassettes are scheduled for release in February 1996.

4 "Suzanne Farrell Stages Balanchine" was performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., from October 17 through October 22, 1995.

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stir. She has taught in a summer program there for the last three years, but this was something else. The corps would come from the Washington Ballet; the principals were handpicked by Farrell, men and women she'd worked with before, or had wanted to see in specific Balanchine roles. Rehearsal was wrested from a host of schedules, with a mere two weeks before opening night. I probably wasn't the only one heading south with visions of Farrell dancing in my head, a fantasy that blurred the bigger issue: how do you review a company that isn't?

Not only was it your basic pick-up company, but the repertory included three pieces of late Balanchine tailored to the gifts of a mature and imperiously omnipotent Farrell—*Tzigane*, *Chaconne*, *Mozartiana*—ballets that urged her farthest out on her own limbs, and have been problematically passed on since her retirement. There were two programs, one consisting of *Scotch Symphony*, *Tzigane*, and *Chaconne*, the other of *Mozartiana*, *Monumentum/Movements* (two ballets that are now performed as one), and *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*.

Of instant note were the secure, reasonable tempos, free of the feeling that a steam engine was coming through. Even more striking was the clarity of the corps. Their coherence was not in-the-groove slickness but shared directness with a stress on energized precision. Corps parts dimensionalize and shape a ballet—they are conscience, character, context—and the group oomph and care these dancers achieved was a triumph. Watching this corps I felt much as I had while watching the tape of *Divertimento No. 15*, that here was a lovely sunlit stretch on Balanchine's path to a more perilous kind of classicism (Farrell's kind).

The principals had their triumphs too. Maria Calegari, fit and slim as we haven't seen her in years (undetected Lyme disease stole her from the stage), filled *Monumentum/Movements*, a double role bleached out since Farrell left it, with her solemn red-gold glamour. The return of this pointy-shouldered siren was cause for much excitement in the audience, not least because her dancing was in full song, articulated and intense. Helene Alexopoulos, NYCB principal and perfumed beauty, took the sexpot roles in *Slaughter* and *Tzigane*, shimmying up a gorgeous storm in the former—laugh-out-loud luscious!—yet looking too inside the steps of the latter, uncomfortable in its insolent gypsy free form (and not in touch with her own insolence). Elena Pankova turned in a fleet, filigreed performance of *Scotch Symphony*, a ballet she first performed with the Kirov Ballet, under Farrell's coaching, and has now made her own shade of St. Petersburg pink. *Chaconne* belonged to the corps, who dispatched its celestial orders with a bright, almost giddy, lift. But Marie-Christine Mouis and Tamas Detrich, in the terrifying Farrell–Martins pas de deux (nimble *and* ethereal), found moments of flow if not breadth in this virtuosic volley.

The great performance in the two programs I saw belonged to the cast of *Mozartiana*, Balanchine's masterpiece of 1981—his last—set to Tchaikovsky's homage to Mozart. I've never much liked the dancing of Susan Jaffe, the principal with American Ballet Theater who took the lead in D.C. She is a technical powerhouse, and holds herself to high standards, but the very high curve of her forehead is bland and cold—she's an ice angel. No doubt Farrell cast Jaffe in *Mozartiana* because of her strength. The ballet sets tests of stamina and balance, and asks for simple steps performed largely and slowly and roundly *at once*. Farrell transcended the test with witty musicianship. Letting herself loft and dip in the little whirlwinds and dark thunderclaps of the Theme and Variations, she brushed playfully against the shadow of death, then ducked away. Other ballerinas have been graced just to pass through in one piece (though I remember a Calegari performance of heat and color).

Opening to the Preghiera, the prayer that begins the ballet, Jaffe opened to herself. Here was a warm, confident, honest performance, shimmeringly sure, touching in

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what it showed to have been inside Jaffe and in what Farrell knew she could bring out. The glow was everywhere—in the charged and rakish Gigue of Shawn Mahoney, a Cherubino in black satin, and in Peter Boal's sterling support in the Theme and Variations. *Mozartiana* has always made me think of a Gothic church, a reliquary with Farrell under the arch. But its black velvet curtains and four little girls in black pouf skirts, followed immediately by four big girls in black pouf skirts, also suggest a school performance. The dancers appear in *growing* importance, a sort of recital-hall hierarchy. And yet when Balanchine brings all the dancers on for the last dance, we find ourselves in the finale of a Mozart opera, the happy reprise in which the moral trots out with the characters, and the audience feels equilibrium restored. That's what Farrell did in D.C. Peace on stage, a teacher in the wings.

We mourn the passing of René Wellek
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Music

Pollini plays Beethoven

by James F. Penrose

Not to squeeze the analogy until it screams, but there *is* something auspicious in the fact that Beethoven's First Piano Sonata starts with the musical device called a "Mannheim skyrocket." A rising staccato arpeggio, the skyrocket was a Mozart trademark, appearing most famously at the start of the last movement of his G-minor Symphony (K. 550). Beethoven's note-for-note (except for the key) appropriation amounts to a cry of "the king is dead, long live the king"—after this six-note figure, Beethoven abandons Mozart and is henceforth engaged in building his own kingdom.

If it is true that a prime indication of genius is the establishment and development of an original style, Beethoven shows his cards very early on, even though homage to musical ancestors is still occasionally paid. The skyrocket also signals the beginning of a body of piano music that, in the words of the pianist Denis Matthews, "illustrate[s] to perfection the almost infinite resource and flexibility of a chosen musical form in the hands of a composer of genius." In his youth, Beethoven was perhaps the greatest pianist in Europe, and, like his successor to the title, Franz Liszt, he used the piano as the primary means of his musical expression. The thirty-two sonatas for piano, written over the course of his career, are milestones in Beethoven's musical, spiritual, and emotional life. The nine symphonies themselves can be regarded as a species of supersonata.

If not rare, live performances of the entire cycle are still relatively infrequent. Aside from the logistical nightmare of arranging the venue and schedules for the requisite six or seven serial concerts, the whole proposition of performing one of the cornerstones of the Western cultural canon is daunting. Technically, the sonatas can be formidably difficult (in his notes "On the Proper Performance of All Beethoven's Works for the Piano," Carl Czerny dryly observes that their difficulties are "not slight"); indeed, the difficulties of the B-flat major Sonata (the *Hammerklavier*, op. 106) are such that its first public performance was given by Liszt himself, years after Beethoven's death. The difficulty stems not so much from virtuosic demand (even the most onerous of Liszt's early transcriptions and Alkan's intractible études lie well under the hand) as from Beethoven's indifference to his interpreter's plight.

The cycle was not often given in its entirety until the early twentieth century, and its modern pedigree really began with Artur Schnabel and Wilhelm Backhaus. More recently, Claudio Arrau offered a luminous interpretation at the Royal Festival Hall in the late Seventies, while Richard Goode and Alfred Brendel (the latter also contributing highly original writing on the subject) are two other pianists with whom the cycle has come to be identified. Although technology has simplified the process (it is certainly easier to record the sonatas over an ex-

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tended period than to perform them as the gigantic emotional procession that they are), it still holds true that they are, along with *The Well-tempered Clavier*, the supreme test of the pianist's art.

In that vein, the Italian pianist Maurizio Pollini has long been acknowledged as one of the great living interpreters of Beethoven, and his performance of the sonatas at Carnegie Hall has been much anticipated. While Mr. Pollini has performed the full cycle in Europe, the current series at Carnegie Hall marks the first time that a New York audience has been able to hear his traversal. He performed roughly half the sonatas in three recitals this October, and he will perform the balance in another four recitals next March. This review covers the first two recitals.[1]

Perhaps the first thing that struck one about Mr. Pollini's performance was the structural lucidity of his playing. It was as if he held the works up to a light while slowly rotating them to the accompaniment of his calmly emotional commentary. As Mr. Pollini's carefully-turned arguments rolled through the hall, his approach fired a mounting elation in the audience, an elation that survived movement breaks and increased through succeeding works. Despite the differences of key, emotional tone, and structure that the works displayed, Mr. Pollini was able to maintain an extraordinary continuity of feeling.

In his first recital, Mr. Pollini played the three Opus 2 Sonatas (which are dedicated to Joseph Haydn) and the single Opus 7 Sonata, with the exception of the *Hammerklavier*, Beethoven's longest.

The Opus 2 Sonatas were published by Artaria around 1796, although there is contemporaneous evidence that the works were known in manuscript before publication. Written, respectively, in the keys of F minor, A major and C major, the four-movement works suggest Beethoven's incipient understanding of the symphonic form—no three-movement Mozart/Haydn imitations are these! The first, in F minor, is the only sonata in the group in a minor key and has been the subject of considerable musicological interest over the years, especially on the part of Brendel, who used it as the exemplar of his theory of "foreshortening"—a compression technique that leads to the nervously abrupt character of the early sonatas.

Mr. Pollini set off the skyrocket shortly after 3:00 P.M. on Sunday, October 8, and, after adjusting to the acoustics of the hall, produced a controlled and highly dramatic reading of the F-minor Sonata. While the tempo of the *Allegro* first movement was somewhat hesitant, Mr. Pollini's delicacy and control in the *Menuetto* set up beautifully the *Prestissimo* conclusion, a marvel of contrasting styles.

The highlight of the afternoon, however, was Mr. Pollini's playing of the Second Sonata, in A major. The attention-grabbing first measures of this sonata are often more defiantly played, but Mr. Pollini's approach seemed to hew closer to Czerny's indication that it be offered in a "spirited and vivacious" style. One of the structural characteristics of the *Allegro vivace* first movement is its punctuation by a series of rests between which are passages of considerable intensity and resolve. But it was the rests themselves that Mr. Pollini pointed up so exquisitely. Time and again, he led us to those soundless passages—no piano, no overtones, no audience—merely an astonishing emotional and auditory stillness. ("Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter . . .")

Gripping though this effect was, more followed. At the end of the second repeat (around bar 117) sits a seemingly straightforward three-bar sequence just prior to the introduction of the development. Although in the tonic, the sequence seems emotion-

1 The first three performances in the "Pollini Plays Beethoven" sonata cycle took place on October 8, 16, and 23, 1995, at Carnegie Hall, New York. The final concerts in the series are scheduled for March 3, 8, 17, and 24, 1996.

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ally divorced from its surroundings, and Mr. Pollini used it to conjure up a most extraordinary effect of otherworldliness. The movement's conclusion, especially the last seven bars' dying over a rising and falling bass, were perfectly evoked. The *Largo appassionato* second movement, in D minor, starts with a muffled staccato bass, setting off a hypnotic series of tenuto chords broken by right- and left-hand trills building to a climax of great force. As developed and transformed, these same chords became almost organ-like as they wound down to the movement's close. The sonata ends with one of the loveliest things that Beethoven ever wrote, a Mozartean *Grazioso* leading off with a long arpeggio running from the left hand up through the right to a repeated E and then leaping down to an echoing G above middle C. This figure recurs in various guises and, although the emotional temper of the movement occasionally slips into introspection and coolness, the theme invariably reappears to bring matters once more into the sunlight. Mr. Pollini showed a device of his own, a little *accelerando* that added an interestingly nervous coloring to the conclusion of this wonderful but seriously underrated sonata. Lingering opinions about Mr. Pollini's reputation as an austere and chilly pianist could not survive such a performance.

The C-major Sonata that Mr. Pollini gave us after the intermission was bright without being blinding. The bouncy *Allegro con brio* first movement had at least four people in Row W leaning forward in their seats, relaxing only after the one-two punch of its final chords. Efforts in the sonata's concluding *Allegro assai* were assisted by a gentleman somewhere down toward Row L whose beeper chimed in (not too far out of key) at the coda. When he walked off the stage, Mr. Pollini looked pretty pleased with matters—as well he should after a performance of such lightness and power.

The last work of the afternoon was the Opus 7 Sonata in E flat. Once subtitled *Die Verliebte* (The Lovelorn), the sonata was dedicated to the young Countess Babette von Keglevics, to whom Beethoven would give piano lessons while dressed in his morning robe, slippers, and tasseled cap. After a vehement *Allegro molto*, Mr. Pollini turned on his structural searchlight in a performance of penetrating beauty. "The way to the highest art is to make a coherent world of which the creator . . . achieve[s] the art of sitting still and making things happen themselves," said the critic Donald Tovey, advice that Mr. Pollini understands instinctively.

A little over a week later, Mr. Pollini returned to Carnegie Hall for his second installment. On this occasion, the audience seemed to be a shade less interested in the music than they were in the spectacle. When the artist delayed his appearance, one gentleman (in the upper tier) started a slow clap and was shortly joined by a scattered few others. On the far side of the hall (also in the upper tier) a fat man bawled "Quiet!" to derisory applause. That evening, Mr. Pollini played the three Opus 10 Sonatas (in C minor, F major, and D major), the Opus 14 Sonatas (in E major and G major), and the first of the nicknamed sonatas, the *Pathétique* (op. 13, in C minor), a crowd-pleaser that was played out of sequence.

The three Opus 10 Sonatas were written between the summer of 1796 and July 1798 and were dedicated to Countess Anna von Browne, whose husband once gave Beethoven a horse. The C minor (described as "peevish" by Tovey, "passionate" by the English critic Eric Blom, and "autocratic" by Glenn Gould) was played neither peevishly, nor autocratically, nor particularly passionately (at least in the beginning) by Mr. Pollini, who instead took a more inward-looking view of the first movement than is common.

The second movement, an *Adagio molto* that is often played with an abundance of sentiment, was cleanly and coolly rendered, perhaps a little too coolly in the coda. By contrast, Mr. Pollini's version of the second sonata in Opus 10, in F major, was open and amusing, and Haydn could occasionally be

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glimpsed behind Beethoven's tonal curtain. A nice second-movement *Allegretto*, however, was spoiled by assorted sneezes, wheezes, whistles, snorts, and snarfs from the audience, who appeared to think that this lighthearted music was some sort of Beethovenian sanction to fill their handkerchiefs. The *Presto* streaked all the way to the dressing room—it was very fast indeed, and very clear. The great Sonata in D major, however, provided the evening's emotional focus, especially with its *Largo e mesto* in D minor, a remarkable, tragic distillate. Mr. Pollini's profound interpretation, lightening slightly in the development, became wonderfully vague and distracted at the movement's conclusion. The third movement, an *Allegro*, is the second part of one of Beethoven's most telling contrasts, with the black despondency of the *Largo* succeeded by a softly consoling minuet in G major, which leads, in turn, to an initially splendid, ultimately enigmatic conclusion.

Mr. Pollini performed the two Opus 14 Sonatas after the intermission. While well enough played, the piano for the E-major Sonata sounded somewhat clangorous, though the *Allegro commodo* conclusion was noble and stirring. The G-major Sonata was more successful, its *Allegro* displaying Mr. Pollini's passagework to advantage. Each movement of this sonata shows Beethoven at his most relaxed and happy and, if the spontaneous efflorescence of perfume from a nearby lady meant anything, seductive.

The last piece of the evening was the *Pathétique*, the C-minor Sonata, op. 13. This work was so controversial in its day that Moscheles's teacher, Dionys Weber, warned him off Beethoven by declaring that the Opus 13 proved that Beethoven "led the student astray." The range of emotions covered by the work has led one commentator to describe it as "program music for the soul." Alternatively tragic, combatative, resigned, and exuberant, the *Pathétique* conjures up any number of adjectives that are better defined by the music itself. Mr. Pollini's *Grave* introduction was nicely graded with a fine volume of sound and burst into a propulsive and gripping *Allegro*. The *Adagio cantabile*, the section of the piece that most of the audience came to hear, was offered in a clear-eyed and forthright style, beautifully colored in the bass. The concluding *Rondo* zoomed, just as the audience hoped it would, and the Vulgarity Award for the fastest screamed "bravo" was shared by a number of people.

Beethoven is no exception to the rule that composers can become prisoners of their own success. In the last century, hack composers like Silcher set hand-wringing love poems to the slow movements of the sonatas to indescribably awful effect. Today, artists and audiences alike have been ill-served by conservatories perpetuating a rather narrow interpretation of the sonatas and the consequent proliferation of uniformly bland recordings. Beethoven's legacy has been more happily affected by the occasional artist who brings an unaccustomed level of spirituality to his performance (Brendel), by one whose musical passion rings particularly true (Goode), or even one who brings a compelling but utterly novel interpretive approach to the received version (Gould). Maurizio Pollini is something else again. With this performance of the sonatas we seem to be witnessing that all-too-rare combination of humility and interpretive excitement, a willingness to allow his listeners to come to terms with Beethoven's sense of form and proportion for themselves. "In art, it is always futile to measure one's perfection against another; what is right is right then and there," said Tovey. As this series continues to its conclusion, it is clear that Mr. Pollini belongs to that small circle of performers whose artistry deepens and clarifies our understanding of these familiar but inexhaustible works.

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Verse chronicle

Martyrs to language

by William Logan

I have criticized John Ashbery so often for what he is, I would like to praise him for what he is not.[1] American poets have always been uncomfortable with a poetry whose designs remain in language. We are a content-minded country, where language is a McCormick reaper, an old manual typewriter, a Frank Lloyd Wright blueprint. Ashbery writes as if language were a medium. With its swooping declensions into the colloquial, its quick-change-artist's unmasking, his poetry reminds us that the soiled, complacent manner of our poetry —its do-it-yourself Romantic style—is a slavery of our own invention. Ashbery is a tone, not an argument; and his delight in spraying graffiti on every monument has been indulged with deep puckish delight, all the while without his writing a memorable poem except on the rarest occasion.

An Ashbery poem begins in the following way:

> A loose and dispiriting
> wind took over from the grinding of traffic.
> Clouds from the distillery
> blotted out the sky. Ocarina sales plummeted.
>
> Believe you me it was a situation
> Aladdin's lamp might have ameliorated. And
> where was I?
> Among architecture, magazines, recycled fish,
> waiting for the wear and tear
> to show up on my chart. Good luck,
>
> *bonne chance*. Remember me to the zithers
> and their friends, the ondes martenot.

Here is the confidence of tone and vagueness of reference, the absurd and irrelevant statement ("Ocarina sales plummeted"), the slangy phrase (what other poet would dare say, "Believe you me"?), the Scheherazade allusion, the rhetorical question (immediately answered), the surreal list (those recycled fish owe Dada its due). His poems are always daring in this wintery, winsome way—one of the delights of Ashbery's poetry is that anything might happen, and one of the despairs that so often anything does.

Reading such stanzas, you feel they might have been arranged in another way without loss, that a typesetter might have jumbled two or three poems together without anyone noticing—without even Ashbery noticing! Ashbery is our Nabokovian genius (at times he seems invented by Nabokov): he's the great lepidopterist of language and life in our late century. He delights in English as if it were his second language, or not his language at all; and like Nabokov's fictions Ashbery's poems talk best when they talk about themselves. No poet argues better about poetry; perhaps it's best that he does so offhandedly. As he says in one poem, "he had forgotten the art/ of knowing how far to go too far."

1 *Can You Hear, Bird*, by John Ashbery; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 175 pages, $20.

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There's a weird compulsive mania beneath Ashbery's work (the poems in *Can You Hear, Bird* are arranged alphabetically by title). Among repetitive poets, you think of Clare, not Hardy, of Felicia Hemans, not Emily Dickinson. In the past four years Ashbery has published 650 new pages of verse—it's not just too much, it's too much by a fabulous, Arabian Nights amount. Those readers of the future, our inevitable critics, may be grateful for every scrap; but those readers haven't been born yet, and we are stuck with the readers we are.

The finest poem in this new book reads like deranged Beckett.

> A hears by chance a familiar name, and the
> name involves a riddle of the past.
> B, in love with A, receives an unsigned letter
> in which the writer states that she
> is the mistress of A and begs B not to
> take him away from her.
> B, compelled by circumstances to be a com-
> panion of A in an isolated place . . .

And on through A-4, A-5, A-8, Angela, Philip, W, Petronius B, and dozens of other characters related by happenstance. It's a comic soap opera, preposterous and long-winded; but it provides what Ashbery so rarely provides, the illusion of narrative, of motion through character, of a past.

Ashbery uses one part of his imagination with genius—the random, absurdist, associative part—and the other parts not at all. I'm sure that critics like Helen Vendler are right, that Ashbery makes sense more often than is said; but when his poems make sense they are rarely likable: they seem pinched and competent. It's in the making of nonsense—or the not making of sense—that he becomes a larger individual, a Stevens without the galumphing philosophy (though there's plenty of galumphing in Ashbery).

Compared to Ashbery, most poets look diminished in their language, trapped by their conception, not just of what verse does, but of what it *can* do. His limitations are more peculiar than those of any poet writing, perhaps among the most peculiar of any poet who has written in English. Who would have loved Ashbery's work? Christopher Smart, and Lewis Carroll, and Erasmus Darwin. This isn't to say that Ashbery too isn't trapped by the machinery of his verse, merely that his poems are often the triumph of their limitations.

Anyone who likes jeremiads will want to own Adrienne Rich's new book.[2] *Dark Fields of the Republic* has more of the sketchy, angry poems she has been writing for the past decade—they're like rough jottings torn from a notebook, like dark scribbles of Goya's. Who are her enemies? Society, Capital, Law, Men—they're never named, but you hear them conspiring behind the lines:

> There's a place between two stands of trees
> where the grass grows uphill
> and the old revolutionary road breaks off
> into shadows
> near a meeting-house abandoned by the
> persecuted
> who disappeared into those shadows.

Who or what is being persecuted is not explained, but Rich doesn't have time for explanations (when she's not preaching to the converted, she's just preaching). Rich makes a cunning point, that ours is a poetry leaning toward pastoral even when steeped in blood; but she wants to have it both ways, wants to ride her high horse through a shadowy poetic landscape.

With every book Rich has sunk deeper into a malaise of hatred, of wronged innocence, of violated trust. Her poems have become censoriously sincere, unbearably high-minded, self-important, Babbitt-like, and yet devastating in their dissection of pain. The causes of pain are disembodied and abstract—her enemies are looming presences, unnameable gods of the machine, her poems like raw wounds:

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2 *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991–1995*, by Adrienne Rich; Norton, 79 pages, $25 hardcover, with cassette of the poet reading; $10 paper.

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Narrow waters rocking in spasms. The torch
hand-held and the poem of entrance.
Topless towers turned red and green.
Dripping faucet icicled radiator.
Eyes turned inward. Births arced into
dumpsters.
Eyes blazing under knitted caps,
hands gripped on taxi-wheels, steering.
Fir bough propped in a cardboard doorway,
bitter tinsel.
The House of the Jewish Book, the Chinese
Dumpling House.
Swaddled limbs dreaming on stacked shelves
of sleep opening like knives.

"Here/ it is in my shorthand," she says in another poem. At times, even now, she can't help being a poet; but the hair-shirt purity of such lines is that of a martyr to language. Only a poet beyond argument resorts to the tawdry insinuation of lines like "Swaddled limbs . . . opening like knives." It's not that her poems make assumptions (all poems make assumptions); it's that they start so long after the assumptions are over. They never have the startling rough vision of any old political line of Lowell's.

When the best poem in the book seems to consist of lines reset from one of Karl Jaspers's letters after the war, something has gone terribly wrong. The lines may be invented (I can't find them in the Hannah Arendt correspondence), but Rich can no longer suffer such pained self-knowledge or necessary regret, such a pathos of attention, in her own voice. A poet as good as Rich shouldn't be capable of writing lines like "worms have toothed at your truths" or "She could swim or sink/ like a beautiful crystal." These new poems revel in so narrow an emotional realm, reading them is like staring into a dark closet until the monsters appear. What they reveal is almost more surprising than emotion. Imagine Adrienne Rich not knowing that "the dyer's hand" comes from Shakespeare.

Rich now lives in an icy tundra of abstraction. Her "Narratives," her "Inscriptions," suggest how much she wants from the present for the future: she has increasingly become the myth of herself. In her poems there are only victims, only the unidentified "you," the shadowy "I." In the absence of argument, the poetry of witness becomes just another poetry polluted with self-advertisement.

When you read August Kleinzahler's work, you think of William Carlos Williams.[3] You think that everything half bad in Kleinzahler was half good in Williams; you think that whatever Kleinzahler does well, Williams did better. How deft, how economical, how unassuming the line in Williams; but you can't try to be just as unpretentious as Williams without seeming pretentious. The economical in Williams is a famine in Kleinzahler.

Kleinzahler is a cool, knowing student of urban grunge. He knows the bar scenes of Bukowski, the sidewalk shop talk of O'Hara ("and asparagus already/ under two dollars a pound"), the beaten and broken characters of Selby and Rechy and Auster—he knows them all from books, and his poems read like an encyclopedia of the traffic in secondhand responses. He's got all the bad of his models and little of the good: the poems are full of falsely hearty bonhomie, cities by Piranesi (and landscapes by Laura Ashley), intellectual anti-intellect (Catullus becomes "Heyho, loverboy/ is that a radioactive isotope you've got/ burning through your shirtfront/ or are you just glad to see me?"). Like tough guys everywhere, he's got a heart of Ivory soap, and it doesn't take much to turn him frothy and sentimental:

There is an abundant peace to be found here

in the blue, then gray and mauve eyes
of the voluptuous women cutting bread into
an embossed tureen.

That's "Follain's Paris," and the rest of Kleinzahler's poems about Paris read like a brochure for the Chambre de Commerce.

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3 *Red Sauce, Whiskey, and Snow*, by August Kleinzahler; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 94 pages, $19.

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For a poet like this, someone else's tragedy becomes a lyric celebration of the knowing eye. He wants an audience that appreciates blackface and minstrelsy:

—*Are you an* Ex-is-ten-tial-ist,
Mr. Mister?

—*Oh, no, no,*
I would prefer to think

of myself, ahem,
as a Collision-Ecstasist.

—*You undress on impact,*
sir?

—*Oh, hohohoho,*
not no more.

The poems are so full of dumb, jokey moments that you may miss the quiet clamor of beauty, a beauty Kleinzahler obviously distrusts but doesn't know how to argue against. In the strange fable of a Weasel and a Ponce, or the narrative of a sailing trip, one sees the mark of a very different poetry; but, wedded to his minor and repetitive designs, to finding the trivial and leaving it trivial, Kleinzahler would find it hard for any other poetry to get hold of him. His best poems are direct forces, lacking that "poetic" attitude that makes poetry more depressing than daily life (that makes daily life more depressing than daily life). He has a taste for beauty, but then it's off to writing ludicrous "sapphics" ("Festinating rhythm's bothered her axis"), or a Gulf War poem of broken phrases ("Assault plasma star launch"), or a dream ("*Gland burgers excrement*/ If it's a dream/ Give the projector a flip, willya"). Poetry has to be more than infinite variety and finite shallowness. It has to be more than Robinson Jeffers rewritten as film noir.

Billy Collins has a sideshow owner's instinct for hoopla and a taste for one-ring-circus ideas; but his poems are gentle, mild, and awfully dull.[4] It's like finding that the weightlifter is an accountant and the bearded lady a housewife. He has an unthinking passion for nature that makes you long for a few polluters—his is a nature of continuous and helpless loveliness. In his peaceable kingdom, the mourning doves look like Robert Penn Warren and the titmice like Marianne Moore.

Collins is an idea man—ideas are his shtick. Auden was an idea man, and so is Les Murray; but Collins wants to be a comedian, too. He'll start a poem, "How agreeable it is not to be touring Italy this summer," and he'll tell you everything he won't be seeing (it's hard to stop Collins from telling you everything); then he'll tell you what he *will* be seeing back home at the coffee shop. It's all very agreeable; but you don't believe him for an instant, because *you* want to be standing by that sarcophagus in Italy. His poems start with the hypothetical and end with a view.

An idea man is hungry for subject, and the titles of Collins's poems show how starved a poet can become: "Death Beds," "The Biography of a Cloud," "Thesaurus" ("It could be the name of a prehistoric beast"), "On Turning Ten," "Keats's Handwriting," "Budapest," "Man in Space," "The Invention of the Saxophone," "The End of the World." It's no great shock a lot of the poems are poems about poetry.

Oddly enough, just when you've grown irritated with this nattering, sweet, educated voice, there are one or two surprises. "Workshop" is a poem I would have thought impossible to write—it's composed of the things students say in writing workshops; but Collins has found a way to make these comments the poem itself, a poem that devours itself like a hall-of-mirrors:

The other thing that throws me off,
and maybe this is just me,
is the way the scene keeps shifting around.
First, we're in this big aerodrome

4 *The Art of Drowning*, by Billy Collins; University of Pittsburgh Press, 95 pages, $24.95; $10.95 paper.

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and the speaker is inspecting a row of
dirigibles,
which makes me think this could be a dream.
Then he takes us into his garden,
the part with the dahlias and the coiling
hose,
though that's nice, the coiling hose,
but then I'm not sure where we're supposed
to be.

This is the poem Ouroboros would have written, if worms had teeth. It's a haunting little Magritte, the better for being perfectly insubstantial: nothing said is the least interesting, except as it creates—as it is—the poem you see.

There are other signs of the poet Collins might be, if he weren't afflicted with terminal whimsy. At his best he sounds like Elizabeth Bishop: "In the dining room there is a brown fish/ hanging on the wall who swims along/ in his frame while we are eating dinner." That poem ends deliciously possessed by the fish's "one, small, spellbound eye," but Collins tries too hard for his lightness of being. Then it isn't lightness anymore. He's a glutton for every hokey moment of transcendence, for "the vast, windless spaces between the stars," for "the immensity of the clouds," for a woman "offering a handful of birdsong and a small cup of light." Some poets get sentiment the way others get religion: "But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,/ I skin my knees. I bleed."

Collins is a good representative of the mild-mannered middle voice of American poetry. It's the voice of sensitive middle-class middle-aged American men (or younger poets who write as if they *were* middle-aged)—the honorable time-servers. Like parodies of moderation, they take nothing too far—they make failures of extremity like Ashbery look like virtues.

Mother Love works like mad to jazz up the story of Demeter and Persephone, but Rita Dove's fragile, prosy talent cannot turn life into myth.[5] She has a naïve and antagonistic relation to her chosen form ("I like how the sonnet comforts even while its prim borders [but what a pretty fence!] are stultifying; one is constantly bumping up against Order"). Her sonnets are therefore laggard, ill-kempt, weak-spirited things, sonnets that condescend to have fourteen lines. The lines tend to run like this:

In the sixth grade I was chased home by
the Gatlin kids, three skinny sisters
in rolled-down bobby socks. Hissing
Brainiac! and *Mrs. Stringbean!*, they trod my
heel.
I knew my body was no big deal
but never thought to retort: who's
calling *who* skinny?

If I tell the reader that this is better than the average, he'll think me cruel. There are responsibilities in the sonnet this poet doesn't accept and freedoms she doesn't understand: that's why her substance and her movement are so restricted. She would like to pretend that writing sonnets is a kind of slavery ("all three—mother-goddess, daughter-consort and poet—are struggling to sing in their chains").

Sometimes the poems are about Dove and her daughter, sometimes Dove and her mother, sometimes about other people entirely—knowing the myth doesn't help much. Though one sees the point (every Persephone becomes a Demeter), it's hard not to find all this odd psychologically. A number of poems play out a mysterious vengeance against children (a mother wants to appear before young boys in her daughter's skin, a mother roasts a baby on a spit—with mothers like this, who *wouldn't* want to spend half the year in Hell?). The poetry would be more interesting if it accused the violence at its heart.

Instead, two of the sequences (one of them "Persephone in Hell") rehearse a post-graduate year in Paris and an ill-considered love affair. Perhaps the Grand Tour qualifies as Hell these days; but the myth makes

5 *Mother Love*, by Rita Dove; Norton, 77 pages, $17.95.

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Dove's experience vacant and privileged, the love life of another spoiled American abroad. It takes courage to cast yourself as Persephone, courage and an unlimited capacity for self-pity: "He only wanted me for happiness:/ to walk in air/ and not think so much,/ to watch the smile/ begun in his eyes/ end on the lips/ his eyes caressed." Bathos is not solely the property of greeting-card writers.

The former Poet Laureate ends *Mother Love* with a crown of sonnets (or "sonnets") on visiting temples in Sicily—they're witty, alert to landscape, and almost always too pat; but they show a poetic intelligence entirely absent from the rest of this self-indulgent and painfully misguided book.

When Thomas Hardy died at eighty-seven, among his papers was the manuscript of his final poems, *Winter Words*. Its unfinished introduction read in part, "So far as I am aware, I happen to be the only English poet who has brought out a new volume of his verse on his . . . birthday." The touching blank remained when the volume was posthumously published.

Stanley Kunitz, the old and honorable warhorse of American poetry, has exceeded Hardy by publishing new poems on his ninetieth birthday. [6] Kunitz was long into his sixties before his work became distinctive, and then much of the distinction was his friend Robert Lowell's. *The Testing Tree* (1971) took over Lowell's characteristic movement and burly, shifting language (reading Lowell is sometimes like watching the land slip during an earthquake).

> That year of the cloud, when my marriage
> failed,
> I slept in a chair, by the flagstone hearth,
> fighting my sleep,
> and one night saw a Hessian soldier
> stand at attention there in full
> regalia, till his head broke into flames.
> My only other callers were the FBI
> sent to investigate me as a Russian spy
> by patriotic neighbors on the river road . . .

Oh, you think, that's from *Life Studies*—or, no, *For the Union Dead*. The influence salvaged Kunitz from an earlier poetry with too many phrases like "rose-gilded chamber" and too many lines like "On the anvil of love my flesh has been hammered out." Such poems survive only in the museum of period diction; and Kunitz has excluded from this volume of new and selected poems everything he published before *The Testing Tree*, an act of courageous abandonment and scarifying renewal.

Kunitz's poems are lessons in the sickness of history. Drawn to visions of hell, he is drawn to the victims of history's great bland mill of neutrality. The four exemplary anecdotes in his poem "Signs and Portents" concern the last giant tortoise of St. Helena, the pollution-scarred caryatids on the Acropolis, the decaying mummy of Ramses II, and the Caves of Lascaux, its paintings slowly eroded by people's breath. An Ozymandias in every direction.

The nine new poems in *Passing Through* are intelligent, rubbed-over recollections and allegories, a little round-eyed and professorial—the work of a professor trying to forget he's a professor. They have his homely, courteous, shambling manner, as well as his mawkish insistence that "Art is that chalice into which we pour the wine of transcendence." The worst of Hardy's last poems were far worse, but the best were much better. Kunitz has often gone as far as intelligence can in humble organization, without the lines ever seeming unbearably right or revealing. Even his good lines never quite escape the prison of impersonation. I wish he had written more dark Kafkaesque fantasies like "The Custom Collector's Report," or fits of tragicomic morality like "The Gladiators," or quirky Landorian epigrams like "The System."

The anthologies of the next century will have great swatches of Auden and Lowell, half a dozen gorgeous miniatures by Bishop (changing from anthology to anthology but

6 *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected*, by Stanley Kunitz; Norton, 175 pages, $18.95.

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always and depressingly including "The Fish"), Roethke's "The Waking" (and Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" and Empson's "Missing Dates"—the future will think the age wrote only villanelles, but will still fall helplessly in love with Bishop's "One Art"), four Dream Songs, and "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner." If Kunitz will not be among them, neither will many peers more deserving; but there will be readers who discover him by accident, the way we now discover and are pleased by Churchill or Sandys or Barnes.

Kunitz's work is isolated and lonely, with an almost biblical presence, where mysteries half revealed call down the centuries. The patriarch in poetry is no longer admired, and Kunitz is too mild and flinching to be much of a desert father; but he has seen the vacant spaces and acknowledged them. Occasionally, in his verse, the desert places have spoken back.

Most of the poems in Elizabeth Spires's new book are stiff with contemporary sentiment, but toward the end a voice of surprising grace and moral resilience appears—she manages to write lightly about the most mortal subjects.[7] The opening half of the book is a sequence about the birth and childhood of her daughter, and you have to like baby photos a lot to get through it. Maternal pride shades too easily into something coquettish and hectoring and drenched in tears.

Children bring out the worst in poets, giving them leave for all the sententiousness ("*I have had a child. Now I must live with death*") and self-flattery ("Through corridors of birth and death we were wheeled") daily life won't allow—all irony disappears with the severing of the umbilical cord. Spires is much given to little unconvincing fables—at times you feel you've stumbled, not into Grimm, but into Andrew Lang's gauzy wings and fairy dust. All Spires's bad habits are reflexive—she has to search for her good ones. *Worldling* is her fourth book; though she has always been an ambitious poet, the poems have been thinner than the ambition.

Half a dozen poems in the second half of the book are simply and impossibly lovely, about mortality but also mortal. They face the loss of youth and beauty with a calm resolution haunted by Elizabeth Bishop. Spires did a fond and thorough interview with Bishop twenty years ago (decades apart, they were both students at Vassar), and one or two of her earlier pieces are the most uncanny, exact reproductions of Bishop's manner I can imagine. But they did not prepare for the warm mastery of this:

> Dusk. The light on the water contracts to a
> tear
> where only a minute before
> it lay like a long spill, and out of the shadows
> the great blue heron appears
> to stand on the periphery of what is and what
> is not.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> But the hour approaches when you must fly
> —fly off!—
> fly through the needle's eye
> to save yourself while I must see the winter
> through,
>
> carrying this moment as lovers do—meeting,
> parting
> how many times over one life, two?—
> as the night closes in, and cold cuts to the
> marrow,
> and, distantly, the lights
> begin to come on in the great houses of
> Baltimore.

This has a mute observing splendor, absorbing the landscape without making it partial or romantic (we are a minor industry of nineteenth-century landscape painters). It is Bishop, but it is Spires too. Bishop, after all, was for years haunted by Marianne Moore; but when we look back now we see

7 *Worldling*, by Elizabeth Spires; Norton, 63 pages, $18.95.

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what Bishop made her own, not what she borrowed. Bishop wouldn't have written in quite this way, and the passing on of the good in other writers (sometimes the good concealed, sometimes the good remade) is what we call tradition.

In "Good Friday. Driving Westward," "The Rock," "Mansion Beach," "Two Watchers," "The Great Sea," and "Roman Lachrymatory Bottles," Elizabeth Spires has come into her poetic maturity—touched by the numinous, the metaphysical, the threat of age and fear of the transitory, but also taking them in a fine cautious embrace. I want to recommend these poems to anyone who cares about contemporary verse. Spires has captured a moral universe at the moment it realizes that innocence is no longer a form of knowledge, the moment it embraces the fallen condition that is the world.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

The importance of F. R. Leavis *by Paul Dean*
Kenneth Tynan *by Joseph Epstein*
The qualities of Robert Musil *by Roger Kimball*
Diderot on art *by Karen Wilkin*
George Templeton Strong on life & music *by James F. Penrose*
The poetry of John Davidson *by X. J. Kennedy*
New poems *by Donald Hall & Robert McDowell*

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Books

Misalliance

by Brooke Allen

Horace Walpole claimed that the world is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel. The story of George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells could be aptly summed up in this dichotomy: Shaw was the thinking man *par excellence*, whose emotional detachment made him seem diabolically cold-blooded to many of his contemporaries, including Wells, while Wells was a man who hardly knew the meaning of the word "detachment"; his intellect, impressive though it was, could always be overruled by his intense emotions.

The two men met at the disastrous première of Henry James's play *Guy Domville*, in January 1895. Shaw, thirty-eight years old, was one of London's foremost critics as well as a well-known playwright. Wells, ten years younger, was relatively unknown, but he was poised for an imminent flight to superstardom: *The Time Machine* would appear in May of that year.

That evening saw the beginning of a fifty-year association between the two men that for want of a better word has been called a friendship, though the protagonists' characters were so opposed, their egos so voracious, that they could as easily be considered enemies as friends. They both used their considerable supplies of charm to conceal the extent of their mutual hostility from their public, each other, and even themselves, and the diverting history of their relations can now be followed in a welcome edition of the great men's correspondence. [1]

"The idea must not get around that the Wellsians and Shavians have any differences," Shaw wrote to Wells in old age. "They are in fact the same body." But Shaw was a master of bluff. From 1903, when Wells joined the Fabian Society (of which Shaw had been a member practically since its beginning in 1884), until Wells's death in 1946, the two men struggled for the symbolic leadership of the English Socialist movement. To their contemporaries, Wells and Shaw represented very different faces of Socialism, and with Shaw's incomparable gift of rhetoric and Wells's of energy, they established the pattern for the two competing strains that are still at odds within British Socialism: Shaw, with his comrades-in-arms Sidney and Beatrice Webb, stood for the bureaucratic strain, Wells for the libertarian one, to use a distinction Michael Foot makes in his new biography of Wells, a study as worshipful as Michael Coren's 1992 biography was derogatory, and therefore equally unreliable. [2]

Shaw had staked everything on the essential Fabian principles of historical process, gradualism, and the organic "permeation" of English society. Indeed, he had practi-

1 *Selected Correspondence of Bernard Shaw, Vol. 2: Bernard Shaw & H. G. Wells*, edited by J. Percy Smith; University of Toronto Press, 242 pages, $40.

2 *H. G.: The History of Mr. Wells*, by Michael Foot; Counterpoint, 318 pages, $29.

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cally invented them. Wells took a different approach: he believed quite simply in revolution. He became a Fabian with the express intention of taking over the Society and boldly asserting his own revolutionary aims, and for that he had the mandate of the younger and more radical members. Where the Old Gang—Shaw, the Webbs, Hubert Bland, Edward Pease, Sydney Olivier—were middle-aged, Wells, if not in his own first youth, spoke for Youth all over the world. Storm Jameson later described the extraordinary effect Wells had upon her contemporaries: "He formed a whole generation, throwing himself at us in a rage of energy, overwhelming us with his ideas, some absurd, all explosively liberating. Unlike Bernard Shaw, who did no more than instruct and amuse us, he changed our lives."

Wells began his attack on the Fabians with a public assault on an economic tract of Shaw's, to which the older man responded with his characteristic bravado. "Nothing can be more improbable than that I am wrong," Shaw wrote to his critic: "still, even I am not absolutely infallible; and as you are an interesting youth, I may as well hear what babble you may have to offer."

Wells was aware of his value to an organization whose genteel brand of Socialism was beginning to be perceived as less than thrilling, and he was determined to make his attacks on the Society matters of public debate, with himself cast in the role of Young Turk. Soon he was talking of throwing all the Society's carefully-evolved theories "into the dustbin," and in early 1906 he delivered a paper, "Faults of the Fabians," a devastating attack on the Old Gang's discreet methods.

> We don't advertise, thank you, it's not quite our style. We cry Socialism as the reduced gentlewoman cried oranges—I do hope no-one will hear me. . . .
>
> You know this cryptic socialism is not a little reminiscent of the mouse that set out to kill the cat; violent methods were deprecated . . . The mouse decided to adopt indirect and inconspicuous methods, not to complicate its proceedings by too many associates, to win over and attract the cat by friendly advances rather than frighten her by a sudden attack. It is believed that in the end the mouse did succeed in permeating the cat, but the cat is still living and the mouse can't be found.

Clearly shaken, Beatrice Webb resorted to the traditional English ploy of invoking class snobbery when bested, explaining Wells's tasteless lapse with the feeble defense that "this is absolutely the first time he has tried to co-operate with his fellow men—and he has neither tradition nor training to fit him to do it. It is a case of 'Kipps' in matters more important than table manners."

Shaw was a wilier customer. He was as determined to keep these Fabian fissures private as Wells was to force them into the open, for he believed deeply in the creed of gradualism, the principle that social change must occur as an organic process rather than a sudden disturbance. He also knew, however, that a number of Wells's points were well taken and that Wells himself, with his tremendous following, was an invaluable asset to the Fabians. He must be kept in his place, as a vital but subordinate member of the team. "Generally speaking," Shaw wrote to him, "you must identify yourself frankly with us, and not play the critical outsider and the satirist. We are all very clever; and long ago we have come to understand that we must not play our cleverness off against one another for the mere fun of it."

Wells was pleased by the consternation he had wrought. He quickly followed up his parry with a thrust, a caustic tract called "The Misery of Boots" in which he sneered at the Fabians and their methods. Again, Shaw played the diplomat.

> The whole thing is so ridiculous that if you once let your mind turn from your political object to criticism of the conduct and personality of the men around you, you are lost. Instantly you find them insufferable; they find you the same; and the problem of how to get rid of one another supersedes Socialism, to

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> the great advantage of the capitalist. . . . You must, in short, learn your business as a propagandist and peripatetic philosopher if you are ever to be anything more than a novelist bombinating in vacuo except for a touch of reality gained in your early life.

At Shaw's urging, Wells stood for the executive of the Society and was elected in March 1907. Predictably Wells and his supporters pushed for the Fabians to take a far more active role in the political life of the nation, and to seek a large membership across class lines rather than to maintain their current identity as an elite cadre of intellectuals. Shaw argued the Old Gang's purpose. "We have absolutely nothing but our ideas to offer; and to sell them in exchange for votes & subscriptions is 'the idea of gain' at its maddest. If you want a party, there are three or four to choose from; and we hope to see another—a Socialist one—formed."

In the event, when it came to hand-to-hand combat with Shaw, Wells never stood a chance. The history of their relations was to be one of perpetual frustration for the younger man. The battle was in many ways unequal. Shaw had honed his skills as a debater and a rhetorician to a level that few have ever reached; Wells was physically unprepossessing, Cockney, a mediocre public speaker. But what fatally handicapped him was the very same ungovernable passion that made him such an attractive figure. He loved, he hated, he felt. He found it impossible to keep his temper, while Shaw repressed his, disguising venom as light sarcasm. Frank Harris spoke of Shaw's "exasperating patience"; he never lost his cool. He defeated Wells by provoking bursts of uncontrolled rage and then behaving like a tolerant adult with a fractious child, tut-tutting about the little one's nasty temper. "I seem to spend my life rescuing the victims of your outrageous onslaughts and seeming to remonstrate with you and make fun of you whilst I have to boost you subtly all the time."

Shaw was victorious against Wells and innumerable lesser opponents in this kind of intellectual gamesmanship largely because of his own unassailable self-control, which Wells was canny enough to recognize as being in fact not so much self-control as lack of appetite. Wells described himself as "a biologist first and foremost," Shaw as having "a physiological disgust at vital activities." This distinction goes far toward accounting for the balance of power between the two: the man who thinks holds a distinct advantage over the man whose body and emotions prevail.

It was Wells's exotic sex life that finally cooked his goose with the more conventional Fabians. He had long advocated complete freedom between the sexes and derided the institution of bourgeois marriage; he preached free sex and he practiced it. The Fabians reluctantly tolerated Wells's peccadillos until he invaded their own turf by trying to elope with Hubert Bland's daughter Rosamund. Shaw, apparently, was moved to remonstrate, and Wells blasted him.

> The more I think you over the more it comes home to me what an unmitigated middle-Victorian ass you are. You play about with ideas like a daring garrulous maiden aunt, but when it comes to an affair like the Bland affair you show the instincts of conscious gentility and the judgement of a hen. . . . The fact is yours is a flimsy intellectual acquisitive sort of mind adrift & chattering brightly in a world you dont understand. You dont know, as I do, in blood & substance, lust, failure, shame, hate, love, and creative passion. You dont understand & you cant understand the rights & wrongs of the case into which you stick your maiden judgement—any more than you can understand the aims of the Fabian Society that your vanity has wrecked.

This is a letter few friendships, or even professional associations, could withstand, but Shaw accepted the rebuke with his customary sang-froid. Little more than a year later Wells offended again, in a far more serious

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manner, with another Fabian daughter, Amber Reeves. (Their affair resulted in Amber's pregnancy, and is recounted faithfully in Wells's 1909 novel *Ann Veronica*, a shocking and notorious book in its day.) Shaw, who actually was quite non-judgmental in sexual matters, came to the lovers' defense and Wells smothered him with gratitude as passionate as the abuse he had heaped on him the previous year. "Occasionally," Wells wrote, "you dont simply rise to a difficult situation but soar above it and I withdraw anything you would like withdrawn from our correspondence of the last two years or so."

Wells stayed married to his Jane, and the pregnant Amber was married off to Blanco White, a young Fabian who generously volunteered to bring up the child as his own. Thus ended Wells's alliance with the Fabians, though he was to aim a final blow at them in his 1910 novel *The New Machiavelli*. But Wells and Shaw continued their association: if anything, they became rather friendlier once they were no longer competing for Fabian turf. A certain distance was maintained, but they acknowledged that in a general sense they were allies, and they kept up a tenuous friendship aided by the fact that each man was genuinely fond of the other's wife.

As Wells passed into his fifties, sixties, and seventies, Shaw's pose continued to be that of the sage lecturing the importunate youth. Characteristic was the advice he offered Wells on how to speak in public.

> When you first spoke at a Fabian meeting, I told you to hold up your head & speak to the bracketed bust of Selwyn Image on the back wall. To shew that you were not going to be taught by me, you made the commonest blunder of the tyro: you insisted on having a table; leaning over it on your knuckles; and addressing the contents of your contracted chest to the tablecloth. I will now, having tried to cure you of that by fair means in vain, cure you of it by a blow beneath the belt. Where did you get that attitude? IN THE SHOP. At the New Reform Club, when your knuckles touched the cloth, you said unconsciously, by reflex action, 'Anything else today, madam,' and later on 'What's the next article?' Fortunately, you were inaudible, thanks to the attitude. Now I swear that the next time you take that attitude in my presence I will ask you for a farthing paper of pins. I will make a decent public man of you yet, and an effective public speaker, if I have to break your heart in the process.

Though they had a common religion in Socialism (Wells spoke of Socialism as "the form and substance of my ideal life, and all the religion I possess"), Shaw and Wells took opposing positions on other fraught questions of the period. Shaw was a Marxist and a Stalinist, while Wells deplored both creeds. Wells was a disciple of Darwin and Huxley, while Shaw, who believed that Darwin had banished intelligence from the universe, had concocted for himself a bizarre faith that he dubbed "Creative Evolution," ruled by a mysterious "Life Force." Shaw distrusted scientists and abhorred vivisection, while Wells was a trained biologist with an unshakable faith in scientific method.

Though Shaw was consistently the superior polemicist, many of his theories were clearly untenable or absurd, and Wells dealt with them accordingly. "These doctors all think that science is knowledge," wrote Shaw, "instead of being the very opposite of knowledge: to wit, speculation"; to which Wells answered shortly, "Science is neither knowledge nor speculation. It is criticism ending in wisdom." As to Shaw's claims to be qualified to make scientific judgments, Wells was openly scornful. He accused Shaw of talking about biology "like a bright girl at a dinner party." "Your phrase . . . of the 'Life Force' embodies an almost encyclopaedic philosophical and biological ignorance."

In the interests of Socialist solidarity the two men agreed to disagree on subjects from the Third International to Votes for Women to the conduct of the First and

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Second World Wars; relations remained more or less cordial, and in a half-admiring, half-annoyed note to Shaw, Wells described him as a "mixture of inspiration, deliberate wisdom and a kind of amiable quackery." It is as good a thumbnail sketch of Shaw as any that has been attempted. But the hostile feelings that had been aroused during the Fabian days had never died. When Wells's long-suffering but beloved wife, Jane, was diagnosed as having incurable cancer, Shaw jumped into the abyss with a bouncing, abrasive optimism and a barrage of pseudo-medical nonsense that Wells, trying to cope with his bitter grief, was not able to forgive.

Charlotte Shaw attempted to intervene with all the tact her husband so sorely lacked. "Please H. G. dont be angry with him. You know he is like that—he must sometimes let himself go in this aggravating way—& he means it all so more than well! He is very fond of you & Jane." But for Wells it amounted to the final straw. The two men continued to be cordial until Wells's own death eighteen years later, but any real warmth, at least on Wells's part, was gone.

In their letters to each other Shaw and Wells, for all their differences, were mutually generous and appreciative. The obituaries they wrote for each other at the behest of enterprising newspaper editors—documents that each could be sure the other would not read—tell a different story. Shaw wrote about Wells for *The New Statesman* immediately after Wells died in August 1946; it was breezy and charming but not entirely friendly, claiming, among other things, that Wells was "the most completely spoiled child I have ever known," his youth a story of "early promotion from the foot of the ladder to the top without a single failure or check"—a patently untrue statement. A private letter in which Shaw responded to the proposal of a memorial fellowship to promote Wells's ideas went further.

> What were his specific ideas? Those which took any practical form, the division of our absurd local government areas into planned regions, the tank, the radio-active bomb, need no promotion. His declaration of Human Rights was not a step in advance of Jefferson and Tom Paine 175 years ago, and left him in despair. He chalked up many ideas, but ran away from them when anyone proposed to put them into practice. He attacked his best friends at home and abroad furiously, denouncing Fabianism and Marxism, the Webbs and Stalin, recklessly. Finally his spleen made him, though once the most readable and hope inspiring of authors, almost unreadable and very discouraging.

Wells had written an obituary of Shaw in 1945, and it appeared in *The Daily Express* upon Shaw's death five years later. Though the essay begins genially, it quickly develops into a document of rage, exposing all the fury that Shaw with his "exasperating patience" had in life managed to deflect. Shaw, he wrote,

> was ruled by a naked, unqualified, ego-centered, devouring vanity, such as one rarely meets in life. . . . Apparently he could not think of any other human being, and particularly any outstanding and famous human being, without immediately referring it directly to himself. . . .
>
> One method of his self-assertion was portraiture. The number of pictures, busts and portraits that encumbered Shaw's establishment was extraordinary. I used to imagine some great convulsion of nature making a new Herculaneum of London. As one art treasure was disinterred after another, the world would come to believe that for a time London was populated entirely by a race of men with a strong physical likeness to the early Etruscans—men with potato noses and a flamboyant bearing.
>
> That was one method of self-assertion peculiar to Shaw. Another, more general, has been practised since Homo sapiens began his career, and that is to inflict pain.

Wells had long discerned that Shaw used a theatrical mock-vanity to conceal a vanity

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that was only too real. It is one of the more serious indictments against Shaw, and it is unarguable. But if the truth be told, neither Shaw nor Wells, for all their great qualities and their immeasurable contributions to the cause of intellectual liberty, will go down in history as a model of humility.

Emperor of chemistry

Ted Goertzel & Ben Goertzel
Linus Pauling: A Life
in Science and Politics.
Basic Books, 300 pages, $27.50

Thomas Hager Force of Nature:
The Life of Linus Pauling.
Simon & Schuster, 721 pages, $35

Barbara Marinacci, editor
Linus Pauling in His Own Words:
Selected Writings, Speeches,
and Interviews. Touchstone/
Simon & Schuster, 320 pages,
$27.50; $15 paper

reviewed by Paul R. Gross

Looking back over Linus Pauling's life—a long one (1901–1994), blessed with huge success and every public honor—one can't avoid his aphorisms. He was a polished public speaker, a famous aphorist, more so as he grew older and broadened his range from mere solver of deep scientific problems—such as the three-dimensional structure of molecules—to international instructor on the abolition of war and disease. In his last decades, the aphorisms became vacuous. Let me illustrate.

During the 1960s, microbiologist Sol Spiegelman epitomized, in a good aphorism, the new developmental biology, formerly embryology, which was being transformed by molecular genetics. "Synthesize the right proteins in the right place, at the right time, and everything else follows." This was sure to infuriate anti-reductionists, but it could nevertheless be tested; and it proved fruitful. If, for example, you stop the right protein being made at the right place, etc., or cause the wrong one to be made, development stops or goes wrong. The role of genes was correctly implied. It didn't have to be that way: early development could in principle have needed no protein synthesis. But the advance of biomedical science since then testifies to Spiegelman's prescience.

By contrast: Barbara Marinacci's devoted editing of Linus Pauling's words offers, as epigraph to its eleventh chapter (entitled "Vitamin Crusader"), the following "favorite maxim of LP in his later, orthomolecular years":

> Having the right molecules in the right amounts in the right place in the human body at the right time is a necessary condition for good health.

A *bad* aphorism; a tautology. It cannot be false; it cannot be tested. Anybody who defined good health as the *wrong* molecules in the *wrong* amounts, etc., would be a fool. Yet this statement, from the greatest chemist of the twentieth century, the only winner of two unshared Nobel prizes, was a cornerstone of his late attempt to revolutionize healing, the rule of his "orthomolecular medicine." Of course it resonates with millions of natural-foods and alternative-healing zealots, who believe that with it the specter of disease can be laid low.

Nor was Pauling, in his later years, loath to encourage such fantasies in popular books and speeches. As Ted and Ben Goertzel report in their sympathetic biography,

> He did not hesitate to say that he believed that vitamin C and megavitamins, in the amounts he took and advised others to take, could cure or alleviate not only the common cold and cancer, but mental illness, viral pneumonia, hepatitis, poliomyelitis, tuberculosis, measles, mumps, chicken pox, viral orchitis, viral meningitis, shingles, fever blisters, cold sores, canker sores, and warts.

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A paradox: no other single scientist has so brilliantly used modern physics and the facts of chemistry (of which he was a living encyclopedia) to deduce molecular structures—and to illuminate biological functions. Speculative as it may appear to outsiders, in structural chemistry scientists come close to the ideal of objectivity. The data force it. The young Pauling was obdurate in his insistence upon full review of all the evidence, in recognizing the constraints of nature and of logic. He denounced competitors (for example Dorothy Wrinch, in the race for the polypeptide structure) who let mere *plausibility* outrun the evidence.

No other public figure, moreover, has so courageously faced political enemies (as Pauling faced Senator Thomas Dodd and the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee), or so shamed them in public by his calm recitation of all the facts. He was, as Tom Hager has it, a force of nature. Yet in middle age and after, his energy undiminished, he was increasingly a maker of aphorisms and an advocate of nostrums that violated his exalted evidentiary standards. His pronouncements on vitamin C, as the Goertzels observe, "were not backed up by clinical studies but were based on theories he had developed to explain *why* vitamin C was so potent in helping the body to resist disease." His public declarations embarrassed many friends and admirers. Hager admits that in his final years, Pauling's "scientific image changed from brilliant individualist to monomaniacal crank."

How could this happen to a humanitarian and a scientific genius? The reflex response, from those who never knew Pauling, is—a nice, ordinary senility. But that won't do. For one thing, Pauling's wholehearted adoption of the counterculture and its shibboleths began in the prime of life. For another, the evidence of those close to him, and from his continued work in pure chemistry, is that he remained a powerful intelligence. These two engrossing biographies, agreeing remarkably on the facts but different in style and emphasis, do not address the paradox directly, although it was clearly on the minds of the authors.

Hager's is the bigger and more comprehensive work, the more literary in its effort to create and sustain suspense, to develop character beyond that of the protagonist, and to relate Pauling's story to that of academic science in America. Pauling's family background and childhood are painstakingly explored. All his scientific works are touched upon; but mainly via the relevant human relationships and very little through the substance of the science itself. This may have an unintended consequence. Social-constructivists will attribute too much of Pauling's success to his powerful sponsors—of whom there were several including the most influential chemists in the country, G. N. Lewis and A. A. Noyes—and not enough of it to the beauty and extraordinary utility of his results.

The Goertzels do it differently. Theirs is a tersely factual account, adequately but not exhaustively documented; but it does make some effort to convey the scientific substance, hence the reasons *beyond* sponsors, energy, and brains, of Pauling's meteoric rise to international acclaim. His first Nobel Prize was a rare tribute to a career of superb science, rather than to a single discovery. The Goertzel volume offers explanation, within a few pages, aided by some desultory diagrams, of what exactly it was the young Pauling accomplished by producing, from then-new quantum mechanics (which worked well for simple atoms but not for molecules) and the chemistry of atoms in molecules and crystals (their "valencies"), the first adequate theory of the chemical bond. It is hard to guess what insight the Goertzels' explanatory effort will give readers who have little physics and chemistry. Probably not much. Also, given today's computer-drawn pictures of real proteins, it is strange that the Goertzels did not select appropriate graphics to illustrate Pauling's remarkable discovery of the alpha helix structure of polypeptides.

Still, the Goertzels are more realistic than Hager about Pauling's politics (including

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his politics of health and disease) as those emerged in his maturity (he had no politics to speak of before World War II). And the Goertzels are closer to examining the paradox of a great mind moving away from its own high standards. In fact *Linus Pauling: A Life in Science and Politics* appends a personality assessment, based upon Rorschach tests, that will, depending upon one's level of respect for psychological theory, amuse or horrify, for the tests were interpreted blind—without identification of the subject—by authorities in the field.

According to Pauling, who saw it completed shortly before his death in 1994, the Marinacci volume is the closest thing to his memoirs. Assembling selected speeches, occasional writings for lay readers, and extracts from his best-selling books, with Marinacci's connectives interspersed, it will be a tool for scholars and a delight to Pauling fans; but it offers no help in understanding the paradox. Marinacci, a longtime Pauling associate, works for the Linus Pauling Institute in Palo Alto: the book is a celebration of its founder. It cannot be expected to identify Pauling's less justifiable acts—there were those even in connection with this institute—much less to examine failings.

But failings, of course, there were. Who, even among the saints, is without them? Son of a father often absent and soon dead, fatherless as a small boy, Linus had to learn self-sufficiency. The Paulings were left, if not destitute, then in marginal circumstances. Belle Pauling, unable to make a living otherwise, used her husband's small death benefit to establish a boarding house. She was a complainer, disabled by her anemia, who made heavy demands upon her children and especially the boy. Linus worked for pay; growing up was a constant struggle for freedom and against Belle. She wanted him simply to have a well-paying job; he, recognizing his advantages, wanted escape and an education. The lonely young man was resolute to succeed, as nobody in his family had done. Thus he was a distant son

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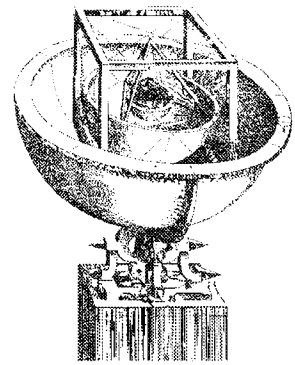

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and later a distant father. The one close relationship was with his wife, Ava Helen. Those two were inseparable and their division of labor was absolute. Despite her political radicalism and her activity in good works, Ava Helen's real job was family caretaker. She managed their lives; he did science. Ava Helen strove to be the perfect mother. They saw Pauling's work as too important for him to bother with domestic involvement.

He knew his own worth and learned how to maximize its yield. His sponsors at the California Institute of Technology and the University of California at Berkeley were masters of the social side of academic science; Pauling soon played the game as skillfully as any. The substance of his work, however, was, at least up to the time of his first defeat—Watson and Crick got first to the DNA structure—quite separate from these academic games. It was on a higher plane than that of his colleagues, and not just at Caltech. Those around him knew it. He got the support he needed because the science was indisputably the best of its kind. It required certain characteristics of mind: high intelligence, skill in mathematics, a powerful memory, the courage to simplify—even to oversimplify—to make a problem accessible to modeling, and a heroic work ethic. When Pauling had worried a problem long enough, an answer came. It was usually right; and he knew it. He was immensely self-confident. Thereafter he simply pushed *his* solution. Addressing one of the many investigative boards before which he had, later, to defend himself against charges of Communist affiliation, Pauling once said, eschewing false modesty, "I have, I think, a broader grasp of science as a whole—mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and geology (mineralogy)—than any other man in the United States."

A self-assured genius, then, is confronted, in mid-life, first with the menacing facts of nuclear bomb testing, and second by the left-wing activism of his beloved and admirable wife. He reads some of the literature, thinks the problem through, and decides—that testing must stop. It makes sense! Already a hero, he gets to work and is soon the most famous crusader for a test-ban. Outside the USA, this gets him an avalanche of thanks and love. To the lecture halls packed with admiring scientists are now added public amphitheaters filled with wildly-cheering crowds. His speeches become simpler, even simplistic. There is no place for the nuances, the assessments of all the evidence, upon which his work in chemistry had stood. Being right comes first. And his political enemies lose, in the end, not only for good reasons of science (there *is* danger in adding fallout to the background radiation, by definition, however trivial the increment) but for complex political ones of which he is probably unaware. A treaty is signed. Pauling receives for this fight his second Nobel—the Peace Prize.

He had overstated the consequences of fallout, and ignored the serious politics of the arms race; but the other side, led by Edward Teller and others, had understated the consequences of fallout and been obsessed with the (real) deceptions of the Soviet Union.

What does such a man do then, when in the course of fighting he discovers that (1) he can sway multitudes; (2) enemies have conspired against him; (3) those enemies are members of elites; and (4) morality and politics are easy, after all? Why, he sees a problem, thinks it through, gathers facts (especially as they come from sources he can trust, e.g., a wonderful wife); he applies his powers of modeling, makes a theory, and then—goes for it! Needed are only self-confidence, an unquenchable thirst for recognition, and a ready audience. All those Pauling had. Thus, Goertzel:

> There is a striking contrast between Pauling's scientific thinking, which was innovative and highly complex, and his political thought, which was simple and predictable. His political speeches were similar to those being given by thousands of other New Left radicals at

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> the same time. . . . In his scientific work, he sought out difficult unresolved problems. In his political rhetoric, he avoided the difficult issues, such as how to reconcile revolutionary egalitarianism with the need for economic incentives and human rights.

In the final period, vitamin-time, Pauling's politics were fully integrated with his scientific thinking. Hubris and adulation, however much the latter was deserved, drove him; the desire to make more dazzling discoveries, to be once more the winner, was not to be denied. Taking from a biochemist, Irwin Stone, certain plausible but unproven ideas on the role of vitamin C in the maintenance of bodily functions, Pauling ran with them. No longer did he examine *all* the evidence, as had been his iron rule in the past. He made a theory based upon a theory, incorporated in it his new abhorrence of elites (in this case, the medical profession), his radical-egalitarian politics, and his genuinely humanitarian instincts. He was convinced that disease, like war, could be ended if people would just look at the logic of things, his way.

Humans cannot make vitamin C—that's why it is a "vitamin": it needs to be taken with food. Most other life-forms can make it. How could this have happened? By a gene mutation, somewhere on the synthetic pathway for vitamin C (ascorbic acid). It probably didn't matter among our remote ancestors: their frugivorous diet provided huge quantities of C. What happens in C deficiency? Scurvy, which, at various stages presents the stigmata of many other diseases! How much C, then, should humans really take in? Well, much more than the government's minimum daily requirement, more than is needed just to hold off scurvy!

This was the beginning of the megavitamin craze, toward the end of which Pauling treated his wife's cancer with megadoses of C (she died of cancer) and his own (he died of cancer). In the arguments that occupied his final days, disinterested use of all the evidence, which had so distinguished his early science, had vanished. Pauling's praxis reverted to the epistemology of politics: put the best possible spin on all results; give opposing claims, but not your own, the most skeptical review; take credit for good happenings; blame the other side for bad ones: that's the truth.

It may yet turn out, not only that eating large amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables, rich in antioxidant vitamins, does lower a bit the probability of developing some cancers—or a cold—but also that megadoses of C *should* be everybody's daily. Given present evidence, however, it does not look that way. For one thing, megadoses have potential dangers. There was and is no unequivocal evidence for large protective effects, much less of cures for any disease—except scurvy. Like his early speculations on immunity, Pauling's "orthomolecular" medicine is a set of plausible but rather naïve proposals. His war against the Solons of medicine was primarily an emotional and political war. In most of it, there was no sign of that lucid, self-critical, scientific intelligence by which he had become the emperor of chemistry.

Priestesses together

Francine Prose Hunters and Gatherers. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 247 pages, $20

reviewed by Robert Richman

While there has been no shortage of criticism of radical feminists and New Age proselytizers, there has been little fiction that dissects these follies with skill—at least until now. *Hunters and Gatherers*, Francine Prose's hilarious satire of the odder progeny of the women's movement—not to mention the Native American "healers" on whom some of these women rely for spiritual guidance—goes a long way toward filling the void.

The book opens with the protagonist, Martha, a thirty-year-old fact-checker at a New York fashion magazine, wandering

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alone down a beach on Fire Island. Her boyfriend has just left her, and, hesitant and unsure thanks to her failures in love and in life, she is ripe for the comedy about to befall her.

On her walk she notices a number of women who seem to know one another and, unlike herself, to have come here for a purpose: they "paired off and gazed warmly into each other's eyes until they fell into melting embraces; then, regretfully, they separated, and each floated off down the beach to another woman, another gaze, another soulful embrace." What Martha has witnessed is not a seaside staging of some trendy play, but a ritual of a "Driud holy night, a late-summer revel and gathering-in of female force." The woman who talks to Martha first is Randi, or Hegwitha (her "Goddess" name); the others in her circle are Titania, Freya, Diana, Joy, and Bernie. The group's leader, Isis Moonwagon, is a former academic turned New Age shamaness. Martha first sees Isis smiling beatifically, educating disciples on the beach; it is she who moments later stages her own drowning so someone—Martha, as it turns out—may have the privilege of "saving" her.

Back at Isis's beach house, Martha comments on the grandness of her home and is icily informed by her hostess that it is not "just *my* house . . . It's *all* our houses." Isis explains to Martha that the house is an "ovulary"—the politically correct version of "seminary."

Across the room, Martha sees a strange sight—strange, anyway, in Isis's abode: Sonoma, the sullen teenaged daughter of Freya. "Stuffed into a tight white cowboy outfit, satin miniskirt, blouse, fringed vest, [and] cowboy hat"—and consuming lots of junk food—Sonoma is a stark contrast to the peasant-shawled, tofu-devourers around her. When Diana suggests a ritual to honor Sonoma's first period—one summoning "the Goddess whose blood flows with the cycles of Earth our Mother"—Sonoma responds: "No way."

Martha's attempts to "center" herself that night, first through long silences and later through chanting with the group, are vain. But most of her initial doubts about Isis and her followers begin to vanish after a satisfying talk with them about her old boyfriend. (Whenever anyone in the group speaks she must be in possession of the Talking Stick. "As long as we have the stick," Isis declares at one point to her minions, "we can freely share our hopes and fears and dreams. But when we don't, our work is to listen and be caring and not judge.")

A few weeks later, after an evening with the ladies commemorating Witches' Sabbath—during which they attempt to communicate with witches-past by lighting a cleansing fire in a wok, all the while wearing hag faces of their own design—Martha agrees to go with them to visit Maria Aquilo, a Native American healer living in the Arizona desert. Maria's specialty, it seems, is to aid Goddess worshipers in their "vision quest"—that is, she helps women literally *to see* the Goddess. At first Sonoma, ever defiant of her elders' wishes, balks at the idea of the trip, but Joy argues persuasively that it would be a boon to both her and her mother: "Being around wise women who live in harmony with Turtle Earth, women respected in their tribal cultures, passing wisdom from mother to daughter. How could that not be good for Freya and Sonoma?" Martha too has some vague second thoughts—walking through the airport, it annoys her to think that onlookers will presume her one of those "instantly recognizable mental-case feminist man-haters"—but by the time she is in the air her qualms are gone. Indeed, she suddenly has the urge to "beam healing love down to a damaged planet," but is distracted by the loud breathing of Hegwitha beside her.

After an amusing visit to a Papago mission in Tucson where Isis again contrives to have someone save her, the ladies pile into a rented van (a Ram, to Joy's dismay) to find Aquilo's Four Feathers Institute. When they arrive, they are greeted, not by Aquilo (she has bolted for the Earth Sisters Week in

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Sante Fe), but her gun-toting assistant, Rita Ochoa. Some of the women are annoyed that they will be working with an unknown. "Who says Rita's a healer?" asks Freya. "Anyone can hang out a shingle and call herself a medicine woman."

Isis thinks they should stay "to see why the Goddess has sent Rita instead of Maria"; Bernie and Sonoma want to stay because they are famished. Rita tries to assure everyone that she is just as good a dispenser of Indian lore as Aquilo. "I do Talking Stick . . . I do storytelling. I do sweat lodge. I do drumming." When the dish Rita serves is revealed to be roadkill stew—"It is very important in our Native culture not to waste the earth's bounty," Rita declares—everyone takes it in stride except Sonoma: "It's like so racist to expect us to eat this crap just because she's Native American and we have to be polite." Yet eat they do, for soon they must fast in preparation for the vision quest Rita has planned for them.

The next day, during a walk on which she informs the ladies that the arms of certain cacti actually do talk to one another, Rita tosses her gum wrapper on the ground; at the end of the walk she offers everyone, not the expected "organic bark infusion," but Gatorade. When Joy asks Rita about the gum wrapper, she mumbles something about the Earth Mother's ability to heal herself, then changes the subject to the sweat lodge, where, later that evening, she will conduct a rite that will purify the group before they attempt to see the Goddess. "Tonight," Rita says, "we will counsel with the Great Spirit and the powers of the four directions. . . . We will gather kindling to heat our stones and bring water to heat our sacred fire pit, so the power of the Great Spirit will cleanse our body of toxins and negativity. The sweat lodge entrance is narrow and low, and when we enter and leave, it is like being reabsorbed and born again through the birth canal." Martha, who has slowly grown dismayed with what she has seen at the Four Feathers Institute, has a sudden realization: "she wouldn't be able to do it. She would panic and not be able to strip and crawl up the birth canal." Tired of "playing at Goddess worship," she fakes getting her period to avoid the ordeal.

Martha also forgoes the climax of the trip—the vision quest—by hiding in the rocks. Sonoma, too, plans to avoid the quest, but her strategy—to run away—is a little more extreme. Freya, when she learns that her daughter has gone, tearfully observes: "I thought some kind of healing was starting to happen between us." (And you know Freya is upset because she unthinkingly cries "Jesus!" instead of "Great Goddess!") The book ends with an unharmed Sonoma found hitchhiking on the highway by Martha, Hegwitha, and a meat-truck driver named T-Bone, a miraculously nice fellow who has been enlisted in the search and who reminds one of the very man Freya invoked.

I have divulged much of the story of *Hunters and Gatherers*, but this should not spoil it for anyone. For what matters most is not the plot, but the particulars. Not a page goes by without some amusingly apt observation or detail. Ms. Prose's uncanny ability to mimic speech—in this case, the precise, pedantic talk of educated New York women—is, of course, nothing new. In *Primitive People* (1992), she does an amazing mimicry of the speech of Hudson Valley blue bloods; in *Hungry Hearts* (1984), that of immigrant Jews; and in *Household Saints* (1981), that of working-class Italians. All these novels have satirical elements, but none comes close to the sheer quantity of ridicule that Prose heaps on her subjects here. And for good reason: in these novels, the subjects did not deserve this treatment quite so much.

It is not that Francine Prose cannot—as her wonderful invention Rita Ochoa might say—"do" compassion. She can; she can "do" pathos, too. Some of her characters—miracle of miracles—on occasion speak and act like real people. (You just have to pry it out of them.) Only rarely does someone (like Sonoma) talk sense from the start. Indeed, apart from Freya's wonderfully

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acerbic daughter, only Titania, the owner of Love's Body, an ecologically-sound bubble-bath maker, takes the air out of Rita's and Isis's respective balloons with any regularity. "Don't you hate it when people use the planet to make a point?" Titania asks after complaining about how Isis forces group members to drink cheap jug wine out of large, environment-friendly bottles. Even Isis (heaven forfend) is not wholly without virtue. But her displays of goodness—and the intelligence and prudence the others sometimes show—do not come close to the number of occasions worthy of satire.

And yet, the judgment and sense a few of the Goddess worshipers sometimes demonstrate only heightens the idiocies they perpetrate in the name of their feminist ideals. Of these, perhaps none is more outrageous than the claim of equality in their relations with one another. From that first cozy mingling on the beach, when Martha observes that "the same rules of selection appl[y]" as at the high-school dance ("the graceful, the pretty, the confident danced; the others stood around watching"), to the rivalry, later on, about who has better visions; from the competitiveness evinced by everyone even for the affections of lowly Sonoma, to the pointlessness of the Talking Stick—everything contradicts the endless avowals of cooperation and harmony. "Power's not supposed to matter," says Hegwitha at one point, "we're all priestesses together. But what do you do about someone like Isis who's so incredibly special?" As for Martha, when she finally is fired from her magazine, she has the urge to denounce the patriarchal rule that she had to submit to when she was there, but eventually realizes that life among Isis and her followers is not "unlike the Darwinian scramble of daily life" at her former place of employment.

Prose's delicious ironies seem almost self-generated and enough for two books. Rita, the guru of rocks and herbs, is not only disrespectful of the earth but man-obsessed and racist to boot. The cancer-ridden Hegwitha—she refuses to tell the others that she is no longer in remission, so as not to spoil the trip—needs real medicine, but has to listen to Rita's bogus claims about the healing power of spirits and mud. And while Martha despises the way Isis plays favorites, the onetime fact-checker has the urge to use her knowledge of Hegwitha's condition to score points against the ladies. This last irony is not particularly at the expense of either feminists or New Agers; nor is the one on the last page of the novel, when Martha and Sonoma appear to share a genuine spiritual experience. But no matter. All in all, *Hunters and Gatherers* is a much-needed fictional demolition of some of the excesses of feminism. Is the book a healing and centering experience? No: just a wildly funny one.

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Notebook

Seamus Heaney's "middle voice"

by Richard Tillinghast

Some years ago when Seamus Heaney was rumored once again to have missed a close vote for the Nobel Prize in literature, Charlie Haughey, Ireland's *taoiseach* (prime minister), was quoted as having remarked: "We wuz robbed!" As Haughey's humorous use of sports-talk and the first-person plural pronoun suggests, Heaney's Nobel on some level belongs to Ireland as a whole. And now, with the cease-fire in Northern Ireland, his having been brought up Catholic in the Protestant-dominated province "positions" Heaney as the kind of writer to whom the Nobel committee likes to give its literature prizes.

But this positioning, this convenient fit between poetry and politics, is perhaps not so neat as much of the journalism I have been reading on the subject would have us believe. Not only is Heaney not a product of the Northern Ireland conflict, his is a sensibility that seeks to assuage (one of his favorite words) and to heal. It would not be true to say, as Auden wrote of Yeats, that "mad Ireland hurt you into poetry," or that the conflict in his native province, as has been suggested, has significantly stimulated him as a writer. Unlike the early Auden, whose genius was sharpened by the revolutionary currents of the Thirties, Heaney would prefer, it seems to me, not to have lived in what his younger contemporary Eavan Boland has called "a time of violence." On the other hand, if Heaney is seen as a symbol of rapprochement and healing, then the political symbolism of his Nobel Prize is brilliantly apt.

Under the Catholic, nationalist, pro-Gaelic Eamon De Valera, the Republic of Ireland, once liberated from British rule, pointedly distanced itself from the British side of its complex cultural history. The result has been a cultural narrowness, where the Church has banned books, kept divorce illegal, banned abortion. The tragic destruction of Dublin's Georgian architecture since the 1950s was aided by a sense that all signs of British domination were well got rid of.

Seamus Heaney has never evidenced that kind of cultural parochialism. He seems to have gleaned from his own reading and from his education at Queens University in Belfast a sense that the English literature tradition was his to do with what he chose. When he once, rightly, bristled at being placed in an anthology of British poetry, he averred that if he were going to be placed among the *English* poets, that would be another matter—defining his work in terms of the language rather than of a political entity. This is how he puts it in the 1975 collection, *North*, assessing what it was like to apprentice as a writer in Northern Ireland,

> Ulster was British, but with no rights on
> The English lyric: all around us, though
> We hadn't named it, the ministry of fear.

In the short poem "Holly," from *Station Island* (1984), while the experience rendered

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in the poem comes straight out of an Irish childhood, he doesn't hesitate for a moment to marshall the full resources of English, both linguistic and cultural. It is one of many poems in which this poet struggles to reconcile the journey that has brought him from a farm in County Derry to his position as one of the most honored literary figures in the English-speaking world.

The remembered scene couldn't be homelier: a childhood Christmastime expedition in search of greenery to decorate the house, when "the ditches were swimming, we were wet/ to the knees, our hands were all jags// and water ran up our sleeves." Fast-forward to adulthood:

> Now here I am, in a room that is decked
> with the red-berried, waxy-leafed stuff,
>
> and I almost forget what it's like
> to be wet to the skin or longing for snow.
>
> I reach for a book like a doubter
> and want it to flare round my hand,
>
> a black-letter bush, a glittering shield-wall
> cutting as holly and ice.

The poem is a lament for the intensity of childhood enthusiasms, even for childhood discomforts. The book he reaches for would be a substitute for those intensities. I find it striking that as a metaphor for the "cutting" sharpness he seeks, Heaney comes up with an image from Anglo-Saxon celebrations of war, the "shield-wall" familiar to readers of poems like "The Battle of Maldon."

This is a literary heritage I fancy it would occur to few Irish poets to claim as their own. The thrust of the Irish nativist movement since Independence has been to recover a cultural heritage suppressed under English rule. Not many modern poets have taken the course of actually writing in Irish, but few, I think, would range so freely in the cultural territory of "the oppressor." Even the Anglo-Irish Yeats looked for cultural references to the battles of Cuchulain or some other figure out of Irish myth. Heaney's counter-thrust finds a rough parallel in the poetry of Derek Walcott, who emerged in the Caribbean from another outpost of the former British Empire. The approach here has been to make free with one's linguistic heritage and not be programmatic about its origins. As opposed to many ideological approaches that come to mind, Heaney's way with the material may be seen as commonsensical and workmanlike.

"Making Strange," from the same 1984 collection, again shows Heaney engaged in cultural mediation. Here the conflict transpires at first not within the poet, but in a triangular configuration involving two other people he brings together on his native turf:

> I stood between them,
> the one with his travelled intelligence
> and tawny containment,
> his speech like the twang of a bowstring,
>
> and another, unshorn and bewildered
> in the tubs of his wellingtons,
> smiling at me for help,
> faced with this stranger I'd brought him.

The language here is pure Heaney, with its well-rubbed, determinedly unabstract adjective, "tawny," and its tight, masterly simile, "like the twang of a bowstring." What other poet could set the scene so sure-handedly and with so little fuss?

It's easy to imagine the farmer scratching his head and rocking back and forth in his mud-spattered wellingtons, contemplating this sleek exotic his friend the poet has presented him with. Having set up the dramatic face-to-face between these two, Heaney leaves them for a moment and goes within. Or rather "a cunning middle voice/ came out of the field across the road . . ." The voice's message goes right to the heart of the divided experience dramatized in "Holly," because it says "Be adept and be dialect . . . love the cut of this travelled one," and calling forth the Old Testament's most

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memorable symbol of alienation, the voice says, "call me also the cornfield of Boaz." Keats alludes to the story of Ruth and Boaz in "Ode to a Nightingale." The immortal Bird's voice is "Perhaps the self-same song that found a path/ Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,/ She stood in tears amid the alien corn."

Elsewhere Heaney writes that in school he took on the Latin pen-name "Incertus," to underscore his innate shyness. And here the middle voice is a voice of encouragement and departures, urging him on to

> "Go beyond what's reliable
> in all that keeps pleading and pleading,
> these eyes and puddles and stones,
> and recollect how bold you were
>
> when I visited you first
> with departures you cannot go back on."

Just as in Keats's poem, there is a bird here also—not the grand Romantic nightingale, though, but a common Irish bird of field and stone wall: "A chaffinch flicked from an ash," bringing him out of his reverie,

> and next thing
> I found myself driving the stranger
>
> through my own country, adept
> at dialect, reciting my pride
> in all that I knew, that began to make strange
> at that same recitation.

These lines make a distinction that is precise, unshowy, and cunning. He is the master of actions that bring two worlds together, enhancing them both, truly one who is "adept at dialect." The poem stubbornly asserts the departures Heaney has earned for himself; but paradoxically it is the homely things of farm and field that he has been able to "make strange."

As for the political ramifications of Heaney's middle voice, it is worth quoting from a short piece he wrote for the BBC periodical, *The Listener*, in 1971:

> For some people in this [Northern Irish] community, the exercise of goodwill towards the dominant caste has been hampered by the psychological hoops they have been made to jump and by the actual circumstances of their lives within the state, British and all as it may have been. A little goodwill in the Establishment here towards the notion of being Irish would take some of the twists out of the minority. Even at this time it is difficult to extend full sympathy to the predicament of that million among us who would ask the other half-million to exalt themselves by being humbled.

Even granted that this was written for a British audience, what restraint, what dignified irony there is in this passage! While faulting the British majority for bullying the Irish minority, he evenhandedly acknowledges the "twists" in the psychology of the dominated caste. And note the use of "caste" itself, pointing out an inflexible social structure in a province where advancement for the Catholic Irish is all but impossible. Readers hoping for a passionate defender of the Republican cause were not going to find it in Heaney, whose sympathy was with the victims on both sides. And as he notes in "Whatever You Say Say Nothing," also from *North*, language itself, including his own, is one of the victims:

> Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing,
>
> Expertly civil tongued with civil neighbours
> On the high wires of first wireless reports,
> Sucking the fake taste, the stony flavours
> Of those sanctioned, old, elaborate retorts:
>
> "Oh, it's disgraceful, surely, I agree."
> "Where's it going to end?" "It's getting worse."

Contemplating the ironic use of "sing" in this passage, one might consider its distance from Keats's nightingale and Yeats's golden bird in "Sailing to Byzantium": "set upon a golden bough to sing/ To lords and ladies of Byzantium/ Of what is past, or passing, or to come."

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Among the several reconciliations that concern Heaney is that between male and female, even within a single personality. In his 1978 essay "Yeats as an Example?" he sees such a blending taking place in Yeats toward the end of his life. On the one hand,

> Yeats lies under Ben Bulben, in Drumcliff Churchyard, under that dominant promontory which I like to think of as the father projected into the landscape, and there is perhaps something too male and assertive about the poem that bears the mountain's name and stands at the end of the *Collected Poems*.

Heaney proposes as a more fitting conclusion the poem "Cuchulain Comforted," written shortly before the death of Ireland's earlier Nobel Prize–winning poet. "It is a poem deeply at one with the weak and the strong of the earth"—and here one thinks of Heaney's own response to the Troubles—"full of a motherly kindness toward life, but also unflinching in its belief in the propriety and beauty of life transcended into art, song, words."

In "The Harvest Bow," a poem written about the same time he would have been writing the essay on Yeats, Heaney enunciates an artistic credo based on the Irish folk-craft of weaving crosses and lapel decorations out of wheat straw left over from the harvest. The first lines—"As you plaited the harvest bow/ You implicated the mellowed silence in you"—introduce a "you" whose identity is never specified: his father or grandfather perhaps? In "Cuchulain Comforted" Yeats has his hero, "a man/ Violent and famous" who "strode among the dead," humble himself and sew a shroud for himself in the underworld. Heaney says nothing explicitly to indicate that the "you" is male, except that he has "lapped the spurs on a lifetime of game cocks" and that he carries a stick, "Whacking the tips off weeds and bushes." He makes with his practiced fingers "A throwaway love-knot of straw."

Quietness, mellowness, love have been—in Heaney's lovely use of a latinate word for its etymological suggestions—"implicated," or folded into, the harvest bow to the extent that it becomes a talisman: "I tell and finger it like braille,/ Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable." The words are rich with connotations: that he can "tell" the object, likens it to a rosary; that he is "gleaning" something off it, shows that where its maker has reaped, he comes along behind like Ruth and picks up what remains, which is what it means to glean. Twentieth-century poetry is rich with objects used as sources of meaning: William Carlos Williams's red wheelbarrow, Elizabeth Bishop's toy horse and ballerina from "Cirque d'Hiver," Robert Lowell's father's battered chair from "91 Revere Street," the laundry in Richard Wilbur's "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World." But I can think of no poem that uses an object more evocatively than "The Harvest Bow" does. Heaney can almost literally *see* into it:

> And if I spy into its golden loops
> I see us walk between the railway slopes
> Into an evening of long grass and midges,
> Blue smoke straight up, old beds and ploughs
> in hedges,
> An auction notice on an outhouse wall—
> You with a harvest bow in your lapel . . .

This poet, "Incertus" no longer, even has the confidence to come right out—in defiance of conventional twentieth-century poetic practice—and draw an explicit meaning from the harvest bow, quoting from Coventry Patmore:

> *The end of art is peace*
> Could be the motto of this frail device
> That I have pinned up on our deal dresser—
> Like a drawn snare
> Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn
> Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm.

If the Nobel Prize committee registered the message of this "frail device" when it linked Seamus Heaney with the frail but hopeful cease-fire in Northern Ireland, then its decision was a wise one indeed.

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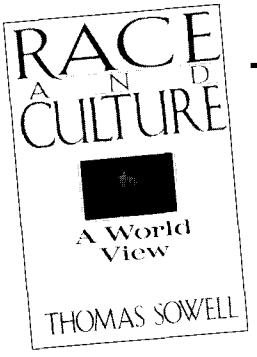

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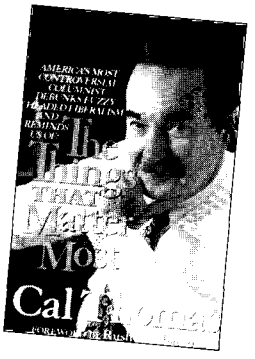

RACE AND CULTURE

by Thomas Sowell

Dr. Sowell spent a decade researching this bombshell. He's written a dozen books, but none as gutsy as this. He explains:

Why some cultures are better—yes, better—than others.

Ever since Sowell appeared on *Meet the Press* in the 1980s and left a panel of liberals stammering, he's gotten the silent treatment. But he won't keep quiet:

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- Why some discrimination is rational and necessary. And there's plenty more where that come from.

THE THINGS THAT MATTER MOST

by Cal Thomas

Cal Thomas' syndicated column is now carried by nearly 400 newspapers across the country—more than any other Christian conservative columnist. His latest book is a manifesto—with the endorsement of Ronald Reagan, William J. Bennett and George Will. Principal themes:

- Why America will reject not only Bill & Hillary Clinton, but any surrogates served up by their confreres.
- But it won't end with the liberals evicted. The coming rebellion is against godless bureaucracies nationwide.

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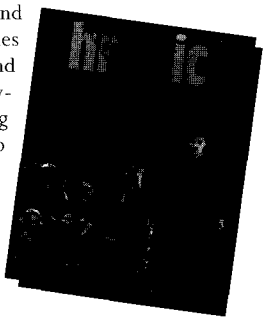

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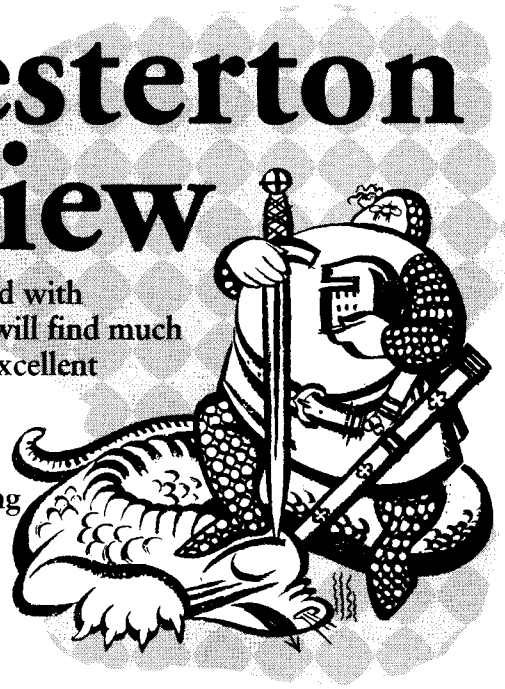

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Supreme Court affirms "separate but equal"

Congress debates affirmative action

It would be easy to note how race is still a — maybe even *the* — central dilemma in American culture.

A better use of this space may be a simple reminder: The men (relax, P.C. police) who founded this country, who penned the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were, first and foremost, believers in the power of ideas. In the utter, inalienable value of learning and knowledge.

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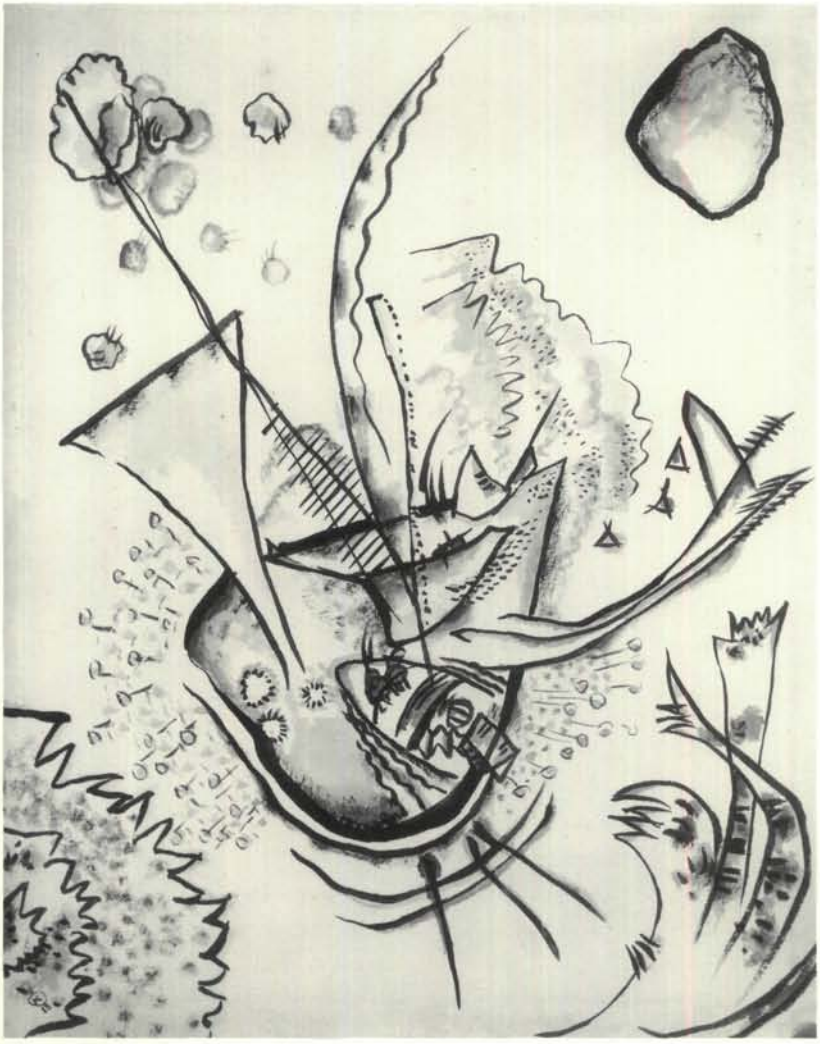

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Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944)
Untitled, 1918
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